

THE NAKED TRUTH

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

BETTER THINK TWICE ABOUT IT

*THE BODLEY HEAD*

# THE NAKED TRUTH

and eleven other Stories

*by*

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# THE ANNUITY



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## CHAPTER I

OLD Maràbito sat on the low tumble-down wall beside the door of his farm, his knees wide apart and his arms resting on them with his earth-grimed hands dangling as limp as those of a corpse. His house was a combination of stable and dwelling-house, paved with pebbles brought from the abundant supply in the river bed, its white-washed walls now black with age. The old farm exhaled its familiar odour which he was soon to lose for ever. How he would miss that heavy warm smell of manure and the musty acrid reek of stagnant smoke, which were the dear familiar breath of his daily life. As he gazed out on his property, his eyelids kept dropping over his deep-set beady eyes, but the expression of the eyes was one of fixity and astonishment, despite the fluttering lids.

Under the heavily-overcast sky the trees stood absolutely still. It almost seemed as if they were aware of the grief with which their aged owner was taking his last look at them, as if they had resolved to remain thus motionless when he would no longer

be there to see them. From time to time, one of the magpies hiding in their foliage uttered a mocking cry. From the burnt-up stubble along the hills and valleys of the Quote arose the glad song of the larks, taken up by one bird after another.

The farmers were waiting for the first showers of autumn, after which they would start the heaviest work of the year—first the pruning of the vines and fruit trees, then the ploughing and sowing.

Three times Maràbito shook his head—no, he was no longer up to work of that kind. He knew it only too well. Last March, at the beginning of the open season, he had said to himself:

“This will be the last season for me!”

So he had harvested his barley and beaten his almond trees, leaving it to the new owners to beat the olive trees and gather the grapes. The day had now arrived on which they were to take possession of the farm. He had only to hand it over to them—and then goodbye to it. . . .

“When the Lord orders, death will come knocking at my door—up there,” he thought, raising his eyes towards the town of Girgenti on the distant heights, looking strangely like a stage background, the old houses shining a rich gold in the afternoon light. He peered at the suburb of Ràbato, which seemed like the arm on which the town rested as it

lay stretched along the ridge. He tried to make out the steeple of Santa Croce, the church of his parish. Near to it he had a little old house in which he would close his eyes for the last time.

"May that day come quickly!" he muttered with a sigh—"as it did to Ciuzzo Pace."

For he was doing now what Ciuzzo Pace had done—surrendering his farm in exchange for a pension. Ciuzzo Pace had had a small ancestral farm for which a tradesman named Scinè, nicknamed the Maltese, had paid him a life-annuity of one lira\* a day. After a bare six months, Ciuzzo Pace had died.

Now, as Maràbito sat there in the deep silence, broken only by a subdued buzzing of flies, that premature death seemed in some mysterious way to be brought more vividly before him. The old man was oppressed by it, though he had no panic fear of death.

He was all alone in the world: he had never been attracted by women or formed any close friendships with men. What hurt him was having to leave his farm after so many years. He knew every single tree, having reared them as if they had been his children. He had planted them, pruned them, and grafted them. As for his vineyard, he knew every branch in it. And besides the grief at leaving his land, he found it very hard to part from the

\* At that time, about ten-pence.

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animals who had been his faithful helpers on it for so long. There were the two fine mules who would gallantly pull the plough from morning till night, the donkey who was an even better animal than the mules, and his golden-bay bullock, Riro, who worked the Persian-wheel without having to be blindfolded or driven. He had trained the animal to walk quite slowly and regularly round and round the well. Every time the bullock finished his round, the wheel gave a melancholy squeak. Maràbito could keep count of these squeaks from a distance. He knew how many turns it needed to fill his reservoirs and arranged accordingly. Now it was good-bye to Riro. From that day onward he would never again hear the squeak of the Persian-wheel.

"Seven," he muttered, for even when deeply engrossed with his thoughts, he never lost count of the turns, trained by long practice to reckon them up mechanically.

The mules and the donkey were tethered on the threshing floor, eating greedily at the straw collected there. Let them eat as much as ever they wanted. Old Maràbito turned his eyes in their direction and began to speculate as to the treatment they would receive from their new masters. They were used to hard work, poor animals, but they were also accustomed to their daily ration of barley and bran, in addition to their straw.

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What was the matter with the larks that day? Their song rose up from the fields louder and clearer than usual. It seemed to the old man as if they too knew that he had to leave them, and that they were bidding him farewell.

Suddenly there came the gay sound of bells, approaching from the high road. "There's the carriage," he muttered, with a look of deep depression. He struggled into his coat, which had been resting on his shoulders with the sleeves dangling, and slowly advanced to meet the new proprietor.

## CHAPTER II

GRIGOLI, the farm-hand to whose charge Don Michelangelo Scinè had entrusted Ciuzzo Pace's little farm, sat beside the coachman on his box.

"Hallo, Zi\* Marà! How are you!" he exclaimed cheerfully.

But the cheerfulness was all on the side of Grigoli, who from that day on would have charge of two farms instead of one. He had already knocked down the low wall which separated Maràbito's fields from those which poor Pace had owned. He

\* Zio (uncle): a familiar form of address.

was in the highest spirits at the increase in his responsibilities. Somehow or other Grigoli had managed to gain the confidence of the Maltese and become his trusted servant. He had a fat, good-humoured face, with large round eyes and a small snub nose. At first sight he looked easy-going and too much of a simpleton for his job, but in fact he had plenty of cunning. His nose was his only feature that betrayed it, but it did so plainly enough.

Aided by the driver, Don Michelangelo succeeded in alighting from the carriage, a three-horse landau. The animals were fitted out with many tinkling bells and the whole turnout could be recognised a mile away as one of those ramshackle affairs hired out for excursions to the countryside. After him, his wife, Donna Nela, clambered laboriously down and promptly held out her dress and gave it a good shake. Then came the two daughters, well-grown twins. The appearance of the party suggested a vat, a barrel and a couple of kegs. Relieved of their weight, the carriage rose on its springs and seemed to breathe again. The horses, poor beasts, were exhausted, foam-flecked and dripping with sweat.

"Your Honour's servant," was Maràbito's brief greeting. He habitually spoke little, absorbed, as he had been, in his solitary work for so many years.

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And now, in addition, he was oppressed by a feeling of shame because he was giving up his farm and yet was to continue to derive his living from it, though he would no longer be earning the income by his own toil.

"Ough! I'm half dead with the heat," grumbled Scinë, as he mopped his purplish face with his handkerchief. "A good four miles by the road. Looking down at the place from the town, I didn't believe it could be so far."

This remark was the opening move of an adept in haggling, who had clearly come with the intention of disparaging the property (surely it was not too late for him to secure better terms).

Many of the townsfolk spoke of him with contempt, remembering the days when he could be seen, all ragged and stained with dust and sweat climbing up the steep and slippery lanes in the quarter of San Michele, his bundle of goods on his back and a measuring rod in one hand. Using the other hand as a trumpet he shouted from house to house:

"Fine French closooth!"

It had not taken him long to become rich, by the practice of usury, and now he owned the largest shop in the whole of the Via Atenea.\*

There the cloth merchant presided in state,

\* The main street of Girgenti.

sitting enthroned behind his long counter, just below the Madonna's niche where a lamp always burned.

The Signora Nela, a woman with an enormous bosom, no neck and a face like a pumpkin, remained discreetly silent. She never spoke unless her husband's look plainly shewed that he wished her to do so. But one of the daughters, looking round at the neighbouring ridge on which stood the two historic temples still erect—that of Juno on one side and the temple of Concord on the other—was so overcome with admiration that she broke into an exclamation of surprise:

“Oh, Daddy, how beautiful!”

The Maltese frowned angrily at her. He had a very good idea of the value of the farm and he knew that Maràbito had already passed his seventy-fifth birthday. Well, if he shewed that he didn't think much of the farm and that he considered the old man to be in magnificent health, there was still hope that he might succeed in cutting down the life annuity of two lire a day which he had previously agreed to pay for it. After all, the land is only land and is subject to bad seasons, while two lire a day are two lire a day.

He was, however, foiled in his intention. He walked slowly round the farm, without being able to find any cause for complaint, and that wretched

fool Grigoli seemed determined to deprive him of any possible chance. "Oh! Look here, look!" he shouted, lifting up the vine-leaves to show bunches of grapes even larger than the Signora Nela's breasts.

"Oh! Look at those!" he cried, pointing at magnificent oranges and sweet limes as they passed through the garden. The very sight of them, he declared, gladdened the heart.

"This garden has fruit ripening like this all the year round, your Excellency."

Michelangelo Scinë looked about him and nodded with a look of displeasure. Either he could not think of any fault to find, or he was somewhat mollified by Grigoli's lavish use of the term "your Excellency" in addressing him, for all he did in reply was to make the weather a pretext for grumbling and assert that he was half dead with the heat.

Maràbito did not utter a word. He did not approve of Grigoli's ceaseless flow of eulogy, for he could see that Scinë was becoming more and more annoyed by it. On several occasions, when Grigoli called attention to something choice, the old man pretended not to hear and either walked straight on or stood still with his eyes half closed and his forefinger held to the tip of his nose, as if absorbed in some complicated calculation. Grigoli, how-

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ever, was not to be put off like this; turning to the Signora Nela and the two girls, he broke out in exclamations:

"Oh! Look here! Good heavens! You must look at this!"

At last Maràbito thought it best to warn him to keep silence and called out:

"Do be quiet, Grigoletto. The gentry have eyes to see for themselves."

That only made matters worse, for Grigoli, quite unabashed by the rebuke, retorted:

"That's just like you—never a word on your own behalf. It's not because you're here that I'm saying it, but the truth will out. . . . Your Excellency, it can't be disputed that for hard work Uncle Maràbito has never had an equal and never will have. He's a regular past-master in everything to do with farming. In the whole of the Girgenti district you might perhaps find someone as clever at grafting, pruning, and the care of fruit trees, but certainly you couldn't find anyone cleverer. Just look at those almond trees, all grafted by him. There aren't finer ones anywhere. Each of them yields three or even four bushels a year, you can be absolutely sure of that. And those apricots—if your Excellency just tastes a fruit from one of them, you won't be able to resist finishing it. Marvellous quality! . . . That's a pear tree, Signorina. It

gives pears as large as *that!* . . . Oh, I tell you, there's no farm like this. You get everything you want from it. And Maràbito has deserved every bit of its success, for he's worked it magnificently. What a pity he's getting too old——"

Don Michelangelo could listen no longer, but exclaimed angrily:

"Getting old! What do you mean, you fool? Getting old! Can't you see he's able to walk better than I can?"

Grigoli smiled inanely and replied:

"That doesn't prove anything. . . . Your Honour is my employer and it's not my place to contradict you, but for a fine, stout, healthy gentleman like your Honour, of course, it isn't easy to walk through the vineyard when it's like this."

The vineyard had just been dug over and it was quite possible to twist one's ankle, sinking into that soft soil. The summer had been unusually prolonged and the warm moist ground gave out a musty smell. Don Michelangelo mopped his brow and struggled on, with a sickly feeling at the pit of his stomach, partly caused by annoyance at the way that idiot Grigoli was praising everything.

"For God's sake, be quiet," he exploded. "You chatter more than any magpie. It's a good farm, I don't deny that it's a good farm, but . . . after all . . ."

He finished his sentence by shaking the first two fingers of his hand, meaning that "two lire a day are two lire a day."

At this point Maràbito halted and interrupted their conversation:

"Sir, to-morrow at day-break I'm going away, up to the town, and I feel sure that I'm going there to die, because I am leaving behind me here everything which has been my life, bound up with this piece of land. I don't like talking, but I must tell you how the matter stands. You mustn't think that I am doing this deal because I don't like hard work. I've been at it since I was a child of seven . . . my whole life has been nothing but one long spell of hard work. No, I'm not parting with my farm because I don't like work, but because, if I kept it on, my farm would suffer, since I'm no longer fit to work it as it ought to be done and as I'd love to do it. When it is your Honour's property and you put this young man Grigoli in charge, who knows more about farming than I do, I feel sure that the land will never suffer any neglect, and that's why I'm prepared to leave it . . . at once, now, without any hesitation. But if your Honour is no longer satisfied with the terms, tell me plainly and we won't take any further steps in the matter."

The Signora Nela and the two daughters were not expecting this protest from the old man and

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looked at him uneasily, fearing a hitch might arise; but Don Michelangelo merely turned to Grigoli with the smile of an old fox and exclaimed:

"And you assured me he never talked! Doesn't he, by Jove!"

Then he replied to Maràbito:

"What do you want me to tell you? That you're a broken-down old dodderer, on the point of death?"

"I am as your Honour sees me," answered the old man with a languid shrug of the shoulders. "I don't know how many years old I am, but I feel all tired nowadays. And your Honour, I repeat, can rest assured that you won't have to spend your good money on me for long. I shall follow the example of Ciuzzo Pace—it's the best thing I can do—and your Excellencies will be left with a fine little property . . . and I pray to God that you won't let my dear farm suffer in any way."

## CHAPTER III

"THEY'VE cut down the young apricot trees in front of the house," Maràbito complained to the women who lived near him on the little Piazza Santa Croce. It was barely a fortnight since he had

left his farm. The old man closed his eyes, and saw once again the little terrace on the hillside with the three trees he had planted on it. Such fine trees! Why had they been cut down?

"As sure as God's in heaven, that's Grigoli's doing. He wanted them for fuel and told the owner that the trees were dead."

He was wrong, however. Before a month was out, people told him that the farmhouse had been pulled down.

So that was why! In place of the ramshackle old farm, the Maltese wanted to build a fine new house, and those three young trees were blocking the site.

The neighbours did their best to encourage the old man: "Cheer up and enjoy your annuity without worrying. They're only trees and you're crying over them as if you'd had an arm cut off!"

"But my live stock?" rejoined Maràbito. "I'm told that the donkey—my dear little beast—is in such bad condition that it can't keep on its feet. And Riro! They say that I shouldn't recognise Riro, he's gone off so."

"Who's Riro?"

"He's the bullock."

"Dear, dear! From the way you spoke of him we thought he must be your son."

Although the neighbours felt pity for him, they could not refrain at times from laughing at him.

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"The farm is under another owner now," they said. "You must just let him do what he thinks fit."

But that was a view Maràbito couldn't for one moment accept. That the Maltese was now the owner, he admitted, but that he should therefore destroy what had been built up by years of hard work, that he should neglect the live stock, no! Surely the Lord could not permit that.

Every day, the old man walked along the lane called Passegiata, which runs to the outskirts of the town. From the end of it he could just see his farm, far away in the valley below, lying between the two great temples of antiquity. He looked and looked at it, as if hoping that his loving gaze might do something to avert the havoc which the Maltese was working on it. But he could not endure the sight for long and had to retrace his steps, walking very slowly, his eyes filled with tears.

Rather than go by the Porta Di Ponte to the terrace of Ravanusella, he preferred to take the solitary street of San Pietro, although it had a bad name, for many murders had been committed there and it was an eerie lane to walk along when night was falling. The footsteps of a passer-by gave out a loud echo, for the hill-side was so steep that the backs of the houses which towered above the road seemed lofty as the walls of a cathedral,

though the fronts of these houses, looking on to a parallel lane higher up, shewed as single-storied cottages of mean aspect. On the lower side of the road the old city wall could still be seen. At intervals were half-dismantled towers, the first of which was closed, not very securely, by a dilapidated door no longer hanging from its hinges. The dead bodies of unknown persons were exposed inside the tower for identification by the public and, in the case of a murder, the corpse was taken there for the coroner's inquiry.

Whenever Maràbito passed along that evil lane, with no sound save that of his echoing footsteps, he shuddered with uneasiness, which lasted until he reached the terrace of Ravanusella, a cheerful open spot. There he stopped to regain his breath, and continued his climb along the narrow lane of Santa Lucia, which also was of bad repute and almost always deserted. Once that was passed he could enter the city by the Porta Mazzara.

As he had lived all his life in the open country, he felt a stifling sense of oppression the moment he entered the narrow streets of the town, or even the main street, the Via Atenea. He did not call it by that name but, like everyone else, used the term "Piazza Piccola" (the little square) which had for some unknown reason been given it. Actually it was not a square at all, but just a winding street

somewhat longer and wider than the others, flanked by shops and the houses of well-to-do residents. Maràbito's hobnailed boots clattered loudly on the large slippery stone slabs which paved the street; he passed slowly along—a typical old peasant, very bent, his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him, his hands at the small of his back and the tassel of his black knitted cap swinging across his neck at each step he took.

He began to shiver uneasily as soon as he set eyes on Scinè's clothshop, some distance ahead, on the right-hand side, half-way along the street, a little before the Largo Dei Tribunali where the crowd was always thickest. The shop had four handsome windows with its door in the centre. Don Michelangelo was usually to be seen, sitting there on a chair in the street, his legs wide apart to make room for his huge belly which bulged like a sack of bran. He was slovenly in his dress, and a strip of shirt often shewed between his waistcoat and his trousers as he sat there smoking and spitting. As soon as he saw Maràbito coming very slowly along the street he would fix his eyes upon him, looking as if he would gladly swallow him alive, like a viper with a frog. He always asked him with a wry smile:

"Well, how are you keeping?"

"I'm all right," Maràbito would answer curtly,

without stopping in his walk. Inwardly he added, "I'd like to hang on for years to spite you." He felt strongly tempted to turn round in the street and avert any danger of the evil eye by making the appropriate gesture. But a few minutes later, when he found himself back in the broken-down old cottage where he lived all alone, his spirits fell. "What's the use of my living on?" he complained.

"Don't talk like that, you silly old man," the neighbouring women scolded him, meaning to cheer him up. "Don't call for Death to come, or it may take you at your word. Much better thank God for letting you live to a good old age."

But Maràbito shook his head and raised his fist in annoyance. What was this talk of a good old age? . . . "That man grudges me the bread I eat and the short span of life left to me," he would say, and break down and cry like a child.

"You live on to a hundred, just to spite him!" they all answered, with a chorus of imprecations against Scinè. "A blood-sucker, that's what he is. *You* suck *his* blood, as he's sucked the blood of so many of the poor. A hundred years old!—you've got to live to be a hundred. May our Blessed Lord and His most Holy Mother keep you alive, to make the man die of fury. You've got to gnaw into his vitals and grind him like this," they said, each

rubbing an elbow round and round in the palm of the other hand, an imitation of a millstone.

Just at that moment a similar conversation was taking in the Via Atenea. Don Luzzo, the goldsmith, who had the worst tongue in the whole street, was chatting with Don Michelangelo Scinè and the chemist from the shop opposite. Though they used less violent gestures and their tone was jocular, the purport was the same.

"That old man'll hang on till he's a hundred, my dear Maltese!" Scinè wrinkled his lips and cheeks in a grin of incredulity not unmingled with annoyance. It was curious to notice that even when he grinned, the effect of his strongly-marked eye-brows beneath his smooth, bulging forehead was to give his fat, stupid, vulgar face an expression of gloom and depression.

As for the farm, he explained, he had had it valued before he made his contract; two and a half *salme* of land, well cultivated—one could not buy it for less than twelve thousand lire. Maràbito must be seventy-five years old, at the very least. Even if he was in the best of health, how many years longer could he live? Probably three or four—at the outside up to eighty. So the farm would cost three or four thousand lire. Between that sum and twelve thousand there was still a good profit.

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"Let him hang on, poor old fellow. I'm awfully glad if he does."

In this way Scinë made his critics feel rather small. To play his part the better, he even made overtures to the old man when he saw him passing in front of the shop one morning:

"Come along in! Why on earth do you always avoid me? What harm have I done you?"

"Your Honour has done no harm to me," replied Maràbito, "but you have treated the farm badly, which I made over to you—the farm and the unfortunate animals. Riro, my poor Riro, is dead, and I can't get over it."

"I! How am I to blame?" exclaimed the Maltese. "That man Grigoli is a rascal. It's his fault. And it's partly your own fault too."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours, because you're a churlish fellow and avoid me just as if I'd swindled you, while heaven alone knows the sacrifice I'm making to keep up the payments of two lire a day to you. Now if, instead of always keeping out of my way, you had helped me with your valuable advice, we should neither of us have been dissatisfied, and I dare say that Riro wouldn't have died."

The Maltese was dazzled with the brilliance of his own inspiration: really, now that he came to think of it, no one was as well qualified as Maràbito

to advise him how to guard against any tricks that Grigoli might be playing. The old man however was hurt by Scinë's words.

"Does your Honour mean to say that *I* am to blame for my poor Riro's death?"

"Yes, I do indeed. If I had had the benefit of your opinion, I should have followed it, instead of being led by the nose by that fellow, who takes advantage of my inexperience and robs me right and left and treats the farm as if it were his own. The neglect and damage. . . . You could have remained in control and exercised authority from a distance and all would have gone well. I'm very fond of you and I hope you'll take good care of your health. Come and look me up and talk things over."

He extended this invitation in a loud voice so that Don Luzzo, the goldsmith, should overhear it.

"Yes, you're awfully fond of that old man!" sneered Don Luzzo, as soon as Maràbito had gone a little way along the street. "But if you think that your kind speeches will persuade him to hurry up and die, you're wasting your breath on them. That old boy'll live to be a hundred—you mark my words."

Don Michelangelo Scinë made his usual grimace and held up the fingers of his coarse hand.

"I give him five years. Then you'll see."

## CHAPTER IV

ONCE every fortnight, Maràbito presented himself at the house of the lawyer Nocio Zagara, to receive an instalment of his annuity. Don Nocio was quite as fat as Scinè, but much taller—a corpulent giant. When he occupied the small closet he used as his study, on the ground-floor of his house, there was hardly room for anyone else to squeeze in. His ridiculous little childlike face, with rosy cheeks and shiny blue eyes, was dwarfed by his enormous neck. The small nose, as red and porous as a strawberry, disappeared between his bulging cheeks, and the tip of his chin shewed only as a hollow among rolls of fat.

He was always ready with a joke; as soon as he saw Maràbito come in, he would say in his nasal Sicilian drawl:

“Well! What does the sulptor fellow say about you?”

Maràbito couldn't understand the reference to a sculptor and looked at him in some confusion, blinking his eyelids. The lawyer had to explain:

“I mean Don Michelangelo. He can't be very pleased with you. Ciuzzo Pace behaved better.”

Maràbito shrugged his shoulders.

“I'll swear that he's satisfied with my farm. . . .”

"Yes, but you've got to hurry up and die, you know," said the lawyer, patting him on the back. "I'm confident that you'll do the right thing!"

He knew all about the Maltese's business affairs, and that he had been doing badly for some time past. Don Nocio was fond of parables and, when the subject of Scinë came up, would express his opinion figuratively:

"A toy balloon saw the moon in the heavens and thought it would be grand if it also could become a moon. So it prayed to the wind to snatch its string from the hand of the boy who held it. The wind granted the prayer and carried it up, up, up! Too high, at last, for the balloon burst—phut!"

How foolish, for example, was that last gamble—buying Maràbito's farm in exchange for an annuity. Scinë thought he could do it because in the case of poor Pace his speculation had ended in a good profit. But Death could play the fool on occasion. It hovered around saying, "Oh, you're trying your luck with me a second time, are you? I'll go to the old man just when I feel disposed, and not before. Meanwhile you'll have to pay and pay and pay." Two lire a day—that mounts up.

The sum was really more than Maràbito needed since he had no rent to pay and, as for his food, he was satisfied with a bit of bread and an onion in the morning and a bowl of beans or soup in the

evening. Some evenings he only ate a salad, often without even oil—more like fodder for an animal than a man's supper.

He did his own cooking on a little stove in a sort of cupboard on the ground-floor behind the big room where he spent his days. The stove was fitted with an iron grating which formed a shelf just below the small window. On that greasy, sooty shelf he kept all his cooking and table utensils—an earthen saucepan and stewpot, a pewter fork and spoon, and a bowl of rough earthenware glazed and daubed with red and blue splodges meant to be flowers. He had bought this outfit when he moved in to town. He did not need to buy a knife, for like every peasant he always carried a bone-handled pocket-knife, a deadly weapon, even if it were only used to cut slices off his loaf of bread.

The big room downstairs, with its raftered ceiling, was yellow with age and on one wall the plaster was peeling off in large flakes. The cottage had been uninhabited for many years and a musty smell of old age still clung to it.

Maràbito disliked both his cottage and the town. In the days when he was a farmer, he hardly ever left the countryside to climb up to the town. Now, little by little, he began to recognise the streets, but in a very dim way—certain smells in them made

him stop in his walk, for they brought back long, forgotten memories of his childhood. He could see himself once again as a small boy hanging on to his mother's hand as he climbed up and up, along all those steep and slippery lanes, paved with pebbles like a torrent bed, in deep shadow, with the walls of the houses frowning down from high above. Of his mother he had no kindly memories. She was a tall, dried-up woman with scanty hair and dark eyes that often held an angry expression. He could remember, too, that she had a very long neck and that there was a lump on her throat, like a hen's crop. Soon after she had been left a widow, she had married again, her second husband being a man from Montaperto, and Maràbito, at the age of seven, had been sent to work on a farm for one of his step-father's friends, a red-haired brute of a man who beat him, for no reason at all, every evening, on the excuse of training him.

His recollections of those days were very dim, almost lost in the hazy distance. Even the years spent in America, at Rosario Di Santa Fe, had left little impression on his mind; he could only remember that there was a measureless expanse of sea to cross before reaching there, and that on arrival, he had discovered that the seasons were all upside-down, June being winter time and Christmas falling in the summer. In America he had

found himself in the company of other Sicilians who had emigrated with him. They had been sent as a gang to work on the land—much the same work everywhere, just as farmhands are much the same everywhere. While working, he had no inclination for thinking, but concentrated all his attention on his hands and the tasks on which they were employed. He had succeeded in saving up bit by bit, over there, enough money to buy the little farm on his return and he had spent the next forty years on it. Nothing had ever come between him and his land: there were the fruit trees to prune, the spade to sharpen, the hay to cut. . . . Beyond the keen shining edge of that spade, the cut of his billhook or axe on the bough of his trees, the rustle of the green grass as his hand pulled it together for the sickle, and the strong scent of the new-mown hay, he had no eyes or perceptions for anything. How full his days had been in those years! When the Lord sent His good rain to the thirsty land, there were always bags to patch, baskets and hampers to mend, sulphur to grind for the vines. . . . When he now caught sight of the last remnants of his farming tools in the corner—a rusty old sickle hanging from a nail beside the door which led into his living-room—he felt so depressed at the thought of his idle, empty-hearted days that he would go upstairs to his attic, throw himself

down on the straw pallet lying on the floor, and lie huddled there like a sick dog.

He never felt at home among the women and children at the little Piazza Di Santa Croce. There was Z'a\* Milla, the best of the lot, very quiet, with the polished manners of a lady. She laid down the law to them all, gently but firmly. There was Z'a Gapita, who looked like a pot-bellied jar and always appeared to be in an advanced state of pregnancy. There was Z'a Croce who from morning till night was shrilly scolding her five children for preventing her from lulling the baby off to sleep. She always carried the infant about held to her flabby bosom and looked so unutterably foul that one had to spit in disgust when she opened her bodice and exhibited her breasts. In addition to her children, she had her animals to scold—eight hens and a tom-cat and a young pig which she was rearing in her house surreptitiously, in spite of the municipal regulations. There were also Z'a Carminilla, called La Spiritata, and Z'a Gesa, called La Mascolina, and no end of other women.

It was well known that even as a young man Maràbito had never shewn any interest in petticoats, and now the women regarded him with a curious mixture of irritation and amusement. They smiled quietly when they saw him embarrassed at

\* Zia—Aunt.

times by some little attention on their part, which he gruffly rejected, though the offers of help were innocent enough, made simply because they knew that he lived all alone. There was no trace of contempt in their feelings towards him; in fact, they were even ready to admit that he was a clever fellow who had realised what other men do not—that what the female sex gives to the male, great though the pleasure is (so great that men go mad for it), is on the woman's part a gift costing less than nothing, and even a pleasure to her. So now, as he had never cared to take that pleasure and had not had to pay for it, as the other men had, they thought that he had really shewn his wisdom and they liked to let him realise that they were happy to be of service to him, though their sex had never had anything out of him.

They were influenced still more strongly by another feeling which was not so much kindness towards the old man as bitterness against the Maltese and regret that poor Ciuzzo Pace had died a bare six months after he had started his annuity. This time that "blood-sucker of the poor" would meet his match and they vied with one another in looking after Maràbito, determined to keep him alive to a hundred, to avenge his predecessor.

## CHAPTER V

IT looked, however, as if that rascally Maltese had entered into a pact with the devil. "Another five years," he had said; and sure enough, a few days after his eightieth birthday, Maràbito fell ill.

One morning, his cottage door remained closed and the women neighbours grew anxious. For a long time they knocked in vain with their hands and feet, then sent for the police and, while awaiting their arrival, stood outside calling out endearments.

"O Zi' Mara!"

"Dear old fellow!"

"Do speak a word!"

The door was forced open and the women rushed up to the attic, certain that they would find him dead.

"No! No! His eyes are open. . . . He's alive! See, his eyes are open!"

The old man's look was dulled by fever and his eyes shone unnaturally. Good God, how he was shivering! To think of him lying there on the ground like a dog!

Their first care was to carry him down to the room below, so that anyhow he would have a little fresh air and escape being devoured by rats (a fate which was not unknown there). They made a bed

up for him as best they could—one woman lent the trestles, another the wooden top to it, another a mattress and a pair of clean sheets and a blanket. Then they sent for the doctor. Z'a Milla had decided that it was pneumonia—a really bad attack. Z'a Croce however raised her arms in protest and, bawling as usual, declared:

“Pneumonia? Nonsense! What’s this talk of doctors? It’s a case of witchcraft, I tell you—it’s the evil eye. You leave it to me.”

And with the help of Z'a Gapita and Z'a Carminilla she proceeded to decorate the newly constructed bed by hanging round it all kinds of charms—horse-shoes, goats' horns, and little red bags filled with salt. Then she collected all the brooms of the neighbourhood and stood them up on their handles against the wall of the cottage, arranging them on each side of the door like a guard at the entrance.

“Get rid of all that muck, at once!” shouted the doctor.

To the great satisfaction of Z'a Milla, he diagnosed the case as pneumonia—a severe attack. He advised them to transport the sick man, with the utmost care, to the hospital. To this proposal the women raised excited protests. Were they not there to attend to the patient by day and night, to nurse him with loving care, carrying out all the

doctor's instructions? What need was there to move the old fellow to the hospital, where the poor were only sent to be cut up by the doctors in their experiments . . . ?

When the doctor had left, Z'a Milla remarked: "You see! I was right," but instantly Z'a Croce was up in arms. With an angry protest she rushed to her house to get her shawl, shouting to Z'a Gapita as she left:

"Please keep an eye on my house and the six brats!"

She soon returned with La Malanotte, an old woman reputed to possess great power in removing witchcraft caused by the *mal' occhio*\*. She was black as pitch, with wolf-like eyes and an enormous mouth. Her voice was gruff and masculine.

The witch sent out for a bowl of water and a small bottle of oil and ordered that the door be shut and the patient held in a sitting position on the bed. Then she lighted a candle, placed the bowl on the old man's head and very carefully let a single drop of oil fall into the water, exactly in the middle of the bowl. The women stood round in a circle, watching, holding their breath. Gazing steadily at the floating drop of oil, the Malanotte began to mutter unintelligible exorcisms, while the drop grew larger and larger as the oil diffused.

\* The evil eye.

"There! Do you see? Do you see?"

In the bowl, by the flickering light of the candle, they could see a shining, tremulous disc, like a full moon.

The women stood on tip-toe, pale with anxiety. Some of them beat their breasts with their fists in horror. Finally the Malanotte poured away the water into a basin, remarking, "What an accumulation of *mal' occhio!*"

Again she poured water into the bowl on top of the old man's head and let another drop of oil fall into it. This time the drop expanded a little less while she recited her exorcisms. She went on repeating the magic performance until at last the drop of oil remained just as it began, floating in the centre of the bowl. Then the Malanotte announced:

"I have set him free. Now I'll attend to the dog who did this."

When the old man recovered from his illness, no power on earth could have destroyed the belief of the women that it was the Malanotte who had effected the cure. And when, shortly afterwards, the news spread that the Maltese was attacked by some illness which even the doctors found hard to diagnose, the popular opinion was that he had been overtaken by a just vengeance perpetrated by the witch. The women would have plunged their hands into the fire to testify to it.

Maràbito had been up and about for a few days when he heard of the illness of the Maltese. The neighbours could never have conceived of the way he would take this news. They saw him in tears.

"Are you mad?" they cried. "What does it matter to you if he does die? He tried to kill you and now it will end in his causing his own death. Well, if his wife and daughters won't pay you what's due to you, they'll have to give you back the farm! Don't you worry."

"But I'm not crying on my own account," protested the old man. "God will provide for me. I'm sorry for him—after all he's the father of a family and he's very much younger than me."

As soon as he heard that, in spite of his grave condition, the Maltese had himself carried to his shop to do business, Maràbito decided that he must call on him, for they were still on friendly terms.

The poor old fellow did not expect the treatment he received.

Scinë was sitting by his counter when he saw him enter. Banging his fist down, he tried to rise to his feet, shouting:

"So you have the impudence to appear in my presence! Get out! Be off with you, assassin! . . . Kick him out!"

The shop assistants rushed up, seized hold of

Maràbito by the arms, and hustled him into the street, despite the old man's urgent protests:

"But how am I to blame, if Death did not see fit to take me? One can't arrange these things as one likes. . . . It's not my fault if he's going to die. . . ."

## CHAPTER VI

**S**URROUNDED by bundles of long snake-like twigs of osiers, willows and vines, Maràbito now spent his days making hampers and baskets of various shapes and sizes. The neighbours had suggested it:

"It's bad for you to have nothing to do, uncle. You're not accustomed to it. Take up some light work of this kind and it will help you to pass the time."

You should have seen the old man now! As happy as a boy. As soon as he had started on the work he became peaceful and contented once more.

When he had a good supply, he started on his round every morning, hawking them. "*Baskets, hampers, panniers!* . . . I'm going to save my earnings to make a dowry for Annicchia," he said.

Annicchia was a little girl who had lost both her

parents; one of the neighbours—it was Z'a Milla—had adopted the child. All the residents of the Piazza di Santa Croce liked the orphan and were delighted to hear that the old man was going to save up for her dowry. Every morning the women would help him to pile his bundle of baskets on his back. When the load was complete, Maràbito devoutly made the sign of the cross, tested the fastenings and shouted, "*Baskets, hampers, paniers!*"

"Is that all right?" he would enquire.

"Excellent!" they replied with a laugh. "God go with you, Uncle Marà. Don't forget to pass in front of that gentleman's door and give a good loud shout as you go by! That'll make his face green with bile!"

But that was more than Maràbito would consent to, even though the Maltese had treated him so scurvily the last time they had met. He could not avoid the Via Atenea, but when he passed the cloth-merchant's shop, he took care to give it a wide berth and went on his way very quietly, so that his cry should not be heard by Scinè, even at a distance. Maràbito did not think it fair to annoy the man, especially after hearing that he was getting worse, day by day, though he persisted in remaining in his shop, determined to die there. The old man was genuinely sorry for him and was bitterly dis-

appointed that, from failure to understand his feelings, the Maltese no longer invited him to come and chat about the farm, as he had done in the old days.

Since his illness, Maràbito had not had much news of the farm. He always waited eagerly for Grigoli's periodical visits—those were red-letter days for the octogenarian. He would question Grigoli about one of the almond trees, how such and such an olive tree was doing, and ask all about the vines and the oranges and lemons. It made no difference to him that the land was no longer his own property, so long as it was producing as it should, that his successor might be satisfied with his purchase.

"Tell me, Grigoli, isn't he pleased? Anyhow he's satisfied with the farm, isn't he? . . . How are the mules getting on? Are they in good condition. Someone told me the ass had died, too. Poor beast, it was born for a life of toil. Take good care of the animals, my son. You can see from the expression on their faces that they are resigned to toil and never know what it is to frolic."

He poured out on Grigoli all the good advice that he used to give to the Maltese before the breach between them.

"Remember, young Grigoli, you shouldn't start the pruning until the first showers have fallen—

else the cuts won't heal promptly and the rain will do them harm. . . . Another thing I want to tell you—as soon as the rains start, break up the soil and wait for the weeds to sprout again. Then run the plough through and you'll have nice clean land and can start your sowing. But . . . haven't you got anything to tell me?"

"Nothing," replied Grigoli, with a shrug of the shoulders. "What is there to tell? Oh, yes, the owl screeches every night down there."

The old man raised his bushy brows and shook his head, closing his eyes.

"That's a sign of dry weather. If this September moon doesn't bring the rain, we are ruined, my boy. All the crops will be poor. Can you catch sight of Pantellaria Island at sunset, on the horizon?"

Grigoli shook his head.

"Then we're in for trouble. Remember the old saying which is always true in this part: '*If you see Pantellaria, be sure that rain is on the way.*' . . . Are you taking those prickly pears to the master? Here, put them into these two new baskets. I'll make you a present of them."

If the Maltese had known where the baskets came from, he would have thrown them out of the window, rather than let anything from the old man stay in his house.

"A sorcerer and worse!" he exclaimed to Grigoli, his eyes bloodshot with excitement. "Look at the state he's reduced me to. All done by the Malanotte woman, under his instructions! I've been told all about it. And if I should die—oh!—my wife has been informed what to do. They ought to be sent to gaol for life—the pair of them—for wilful murder. As for saying that I've got cirrhosis of the liver—that's what the doctors say now—it's all rubbish." He turned to his wife and raised his hand with a threatening gesture as if to say: "If you don't carry out my wishes, it'll be the worse for you."

Signora Nela, flushed as red as a chilli, was biting her lip to keep herself from breaking down in her husband's presence. She felt that her heart would not stand the anguish of seeing him reduced to that terrible condition, almost at death's door. She too believed that the Malanotte and Maràbito had caused the disaster. And when, a few days later, the Maltese—protesting even in his final delirium that he wasn't going to die—actually did succumb, she went so far as to obtain legal opinion whether she could not take criminal proceedings against the two assassins.

When Maràbito saw the three doors of the shop closed, with a black band across them as a sign of mourning, he remained for a while staring as if

rooted to the spot. Then he returned to his little piazza with the woe-begone look of a beaten cur. A great crowd of the women collected round him, and there was an animated discussion as to what it was best for him to do. In the end they decided to send him to the lawyer, Zagara. They advised him to insist on sticking to his old contract, and to reject any suggested alteration.

"What!" exclaimed Nocio Zagara when he saw the old man approaching, cap in hand. "Haven't they put you in prison yet?"

Maràbito gave him a startled look, then smiled sadly, saying:

"Me to end my days in prison, your Excellency? How am I to blame for what happened?"

"You and the Malanotte, wasn't it?" rejoined the lawyer. "Death came to your house and, by arrangement with the witch, you sent him on instead to the house of Don Michelangelo. The whole town says it was so. And the widow, my good man, has already proposed to start proceedings against you."

"Against me? Oh! my God, it's not possible! I have nothing whatever to do with it! I swear it to you, sir, on my soul's salvation." And the old man folded his arms across his breast and bowed. He did not perceive that the lawyer was merely amusing himself by trying to frighten him.

## THE NAKED TRUTH

"Ah! You see? You yourself confess to the crime. I will give evidence to that effect before the judges."

"I!" shouted Maràbito, suddenly overcome with panic. "You say that I have confessed? Why, I don't know anything about it! I was at my death's door at the time. And now you want to send me to prison? To take away my farm and put me in gaol at eighty-one, simply because I have lived on and not died, as poor Ciuzzo Pace did, after six months? But the justice of heaven will look after the poor. We've just had proof of that, for he—the man who tried to kill me—has died himself instead."

"That'll do, that'll do," said the lawyer, unable to restrain his laughter any longer. "We'll hope it won't come to anything. . . . There are other troubles, however. You see, it isn't merely that you've managed to get rid of the man; the estate he has left behind is subject to no end of encumbrances. . . ."

Maràbito remembered the women's warning. He frowned heavily and said:

"Encumbrances? I don't want to hear anything about them. My contract provides for my rights. I'll take back the farm."

"Well, well, we'll see what can be done," said Zagara, rising with a sigh. "I'll go and see the

widow, and I hope to be able to arrange matters. Come back again in the evening."

At Signora Nela's house, the lawyer met the doctor who had come to pay a visit of condolence, and who kept repeating emphatically:

"No, no, my dear lady, don't listen to such stories. They are all nonsense. It was a typical case of cirrhosis of the liver—quite a typical case," and he smiled pityingly at the ignorance of the enormous woman.

When the doctor had left, Signora Nela's bosom heaved as if an earthquake were moving it, and finally she broke down into a violent storm of sobs and screams. Nocio Zagara was infected by her distress: the sight of that mountain of flesh heaving convulsively produced similar convulsive movements in his own huge frame; but, after shedding a few tears, he suddenly stood up and in a tone of great irritation, as if very angry with himself and the widow for breaking down, he exclaimed:

"But this is nothing to what is to come, dear lady. There's worse, much worse."

This exclamation did not serve its purpose. So with a look of determination he took his stand in front of the Signora and said:

"You must calm yourself for a moment, madam, or I shall go away. You are the mother of a family

and ought to think of your daughters. There is business to discuss."

It was no trifle, that business. As soon as the Signora learned that not only had the financial position of her late husband been impaired, but that he had been half ruined at the time of his death, her screams were loud enough to crack the walls of the house. The previous outburst was nothing in comparison. Nocio Zagara was in despair. In the hope of stemming the torrent, he tried to put the blame on Maràbito and his annuity.

"For heaven's sake, don't speak of that fiend," shouted Signora Nela, waving her arms wildly.

"Ah! If only your dear husband had listened to my advice," said the lawyer with a sigh. . . . "Meanwhile, my dear lady, we *must* speak of him. What do you want to do about the annuity? If you ask my opinion, it's like having a vein opened and losing your blood drop by drop. *Gutta Cavat Lapidem.*"

"No," cried the widow, "I won't speak of him. That assassin is quite capable of bringing about my death too, and my girls' . . ."

"Well," concluded the lawyer, "in that case I have a proposal to make to you. I've got some one—a friend of mine—who is willing to take over the obligations under Maràbito's contract. I pointed out to him the fact that poor Don Michel

angelo had been paying the annuity for the past six years. 'I'm awfully sorry,' replied my friend, 'but that's just his bad luck. I didn't make him pay it.' I spoke then about the new farmhouse, which has cost several thousand lire already, and isn't yet finished. Was he unwilling to take that into account also? No, he said, for the farmhouse he'd be disposed to give something like three or four thousand lire. Well, if you are prepared to accept this offer, you'll kill two birds with one stone, so to speak—that is to say you'll be rid of the sorcerer and you'll be free from an old debt. As you may have seen in the accounts I gave you, poor Don Michelangelo owed me five thousand lire. The three or four thousand lire which the new holder of the farm will pay for the house (I hope it will be four not three thousand) will be credited to my claim. I won't consider it a part payment on account, but a final settlement. That will satisfy me. Will it satisfy you?"

Signora Nela was delighted with the arrangement. The lawyer returned direct to his office, for night had by that time fallen.

Maràbito was waiting there for him. When Don Nocio Zagara saw him, he laid his hand on the old man's shoulder and said with a profound sigh:

"Once upon a time there was a father who expressed his regret at his son's habits by saying:

'I don't shed tears because my son has lost a lot of money through gambling, but I do weep for the fact that he *will* persist in trying to recover his losses by continuing to gamble.' Now I had a claim for five thousand lire against the Maltese and, so as not to lose the money, I am doing what's probably the most foolish thing I ever did. Sit down. How old are you?"

"Eighty-one," said Maràbito, as he took a chair.

"Then aren't you satisfied yet? What are your intentions?"

The old man stared at him without seeing his point.

"Ah, you're pretending not to understand. You are living on too long, my good man. It's an ugly habit, which you ought to get rid of."

Maràbito smiled and raised his hand with a vague gesture.

"Life seems long, your Excellency, but it passes. Mine seems to have passed, as if I had been standing at a window looking out."

"Very well put," exclaimed Don Nocio. "Well, now tell me, do you intend to stand at that window looking out much longer?"

"For my part," replied the old man, "if death comes to claim me to-morrow, I shall be pleased to die, your Excellency—that means nothing to me. But for me to live on is a matter which only God can

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decide. He has but to say the word and I am ready to go. . . . What orders has your Honour to give me?"

The lawyer fixed a time for him to come on the morrow, when he would renew the contract for the annuity, himself taking over the obligations of the Maltese. "Though—who knows . . ." he said, throwing his arms open with a doubtful gesture and leaving his sentence unfinished.

As he left the office, the octogenarian raised his finger to the starry sky, then joined his hands together, as much as to say, "You must pray to God about that."

## CHAPTER VII

WHEN Signora Nela came to know that the friend about whom the lawyer had spoken in connection with the annuity was the lawyer himself, she seemed on the verge of going out of her mind. She had already maintained that Don Nocio Zagara must have made away with half of the estate her husband had left. How could it be possible that the richest merchant in the town had left his family in such poor circumstances? And now here was the proof of it—Zagara had not dared to

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admit to her that it was he himself who was taking over the old man's contract. True, Maràbito had driven a hard bargain with her husband and shewn himself as grasping as a Jew; but the fact that Zagara had renewed the agreement proved that now that Maràbito was a much older man, the annuity offered a good prospect of profits.

"Taking advantage like that of a poor widow and two poor orphans!" she exclaimed to the people who called to condole with her on her misfortunes. "Such monstrous behaviour should meet with vengeance at God's hands! The rascally thief!"

The cause of all her troubles was no longer Maràbito, but the lawyer. She trusted in God's justice, however, to see that the farm on which her dear husband had thrown away so much money—that farm whose possession he had never been able to enjoy free of encumbrance—should never become the absolute property of that villain. With this idea she sent a message one day asking the old man to call on her.

Maràbito appeared before her, feeling very distressed and embarrassed. As soon as she saw him, Signora Nela started weeping and screaming, then exclaimed:

"Do you see? Do you see what you've done?"

The old man also had tears in his eyes.

"Don't cry! Don't cry!" Signora Nela shouted angrily all of a sudden. "I'll forgive you on one condition—on condition that you do to him—that robber—what you did to my husband. Bleed him to death, make him die before you do, and I'll forgive you. He mustn't enjoy the ownership of the farm—that brigand—he mustn't be allowed to suck my husband's blood. If you are a Christian, if you have any conscience, any sense of honour, you've got to live on, to survive him—d'you hear? All I ask is that you keep in robust health until he snuffs out. Do you understand?"

"As your Excellency orders," replied the old man, half-stunned by the angry torrent of words. "But, dear madam, believe me, I am greatly upset. God alone knows what sorrow I feel within me at this very moment. I never expected, never believed it possible that I should live on for so long."

"It's quite another matter now—you've simply got to stay alive," retorted Signora Nela with a fresh outburst of rage. "You've got to punish that swindler! Take good care of yourself. If you are ever in need of anything, come and tell me. I'd even take the bread out of my own mouth to feed you. Are you well supplied with clothing? Wait a minute—I'll give you some at once—some clothes that belonged to my dear husband. You must

take care to wrap up against the cold, now that the winter's come. Just wait a minute."

She insisted on making up a bundle of warm clothing of her husband's. As she took the garments from the cupboard, she wept, biting her lip, blinking and gulping down her sobs.

"Wait a bit, here it is, this cloak too is for you. My poor dear man used to wear it when he went down to your farm. Take it, it's yours. It'll keep you warm and protect you from the rain and wind. At your age you must be careful not to catch a chill—there's often such a cutting wind in these parts."

Though the gift was not prompted by generosity or even kindness, Maràbito could not see his way to refuse the bundle of clothing. He went back to his cottage, feeling very depressed.

"Hullo, Uncle Marà. Have you had good luck? What's that you're carrying?" the woman asked him cheerfully, thinking that he was bringing things for the orphan girl's trousseau. When they saw, however, that he had brought the clothes and cloak of the Maltese, they made the gestures against the evil eye.

"What! You've actually taken those clothes! Throw the things away at once, don't handle them!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders and tied up

the bundle again very deliberately. All that night, however, he could not close his eyes. He was haunted by the thought that the dead man's clothes were in the house, and it seemed a thousand years before dawn came, when he got up and rid himself of the clothing by giving it away to people who were in greater need than he was.

From that day on, a deeper shade of melancholy settled over his face. He was especially gloomy on the days when he went to collect his periodical annuity payments. To tell the truth, the lawyer did not treat him badly but he always reproached him for the same thing—his bad habit of living too long. The poor old man worried terribly over this. All his life he had never been a burden to anyone, and now here he was living on, a burden to himself and to others. The fortnightly visit to collect the instalment of that burden became a real torture to him and, each time that he repeated it, he hoped with all his heart that it was the last time. But the days passed, the months, the years: his melancholy grew upon him and death did not come; it would not come.

Seeing him always so sad, the women redoubled their care of him. They would no longer let him stay outside so often for an evening chat, seated at the door of his cottage.

"Go inside, Uncle," they would say. "It's get-

ting cold. We'll come and look you up in a little while."

They waited until their men-folk came back from work, from the fields down below, or from the mines or the factories; then the first call paid was on Maràbito. And there in his cottage, after a frugal supper, they collected of a winter's evening to keep him company, the men smoking their pipes and the women knitting; they drew out the taciturn old man, making him tell them about his long life, about far-away America where, in his youth, he had learnt how to turn his hand to everything.

"You? By the Blessed Virgin! What do you know?" said one of the younger women to him, with a toss of her head, and half-closed her eyes. "Why, you're like a small child, you are. . . ."

The other women all laughed.

These evenings were not kept up late, because the men had to rise at early dawn to get off to work, and also it was thought better not to tire the aged man. The visitors would wish him good night, advise him to fasten his door well and give a shout if he needed anything. Out in the square they would talk in low tones, eagerly discussing his condition.

"A hundred years! He'll live to a hundred, as sure as there's a God above. He's not far off a hundred now. . . . He's in splendid health!"

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"Yes, yes, but how often, even when they're in such good health, people die suddenly. . . . At that age, one never can tell. . . . They die off just like the birds."

Then they would turn and look back anxiously across the deserted little piazza, with its pebbles gleaming in the moonlight, at the closed door of the cottage, and wonder whether the old man would open it again on the morrow.

## CHAPTER VIII

FOR years and years the first door to open in the little square—always at dawn—was Maràbito's. There was no doubt that death was amusing itself capriciously—first at the expense of the Maltese, now at that of the lawyer Zagara. Everywhere in the district people were amused by the story, and no day passed without a few curious sightseers coming to visit the place to have a look at the old man whom "fate kept alive to punish the other man."

There had grown up in the village a kind of legend about Maràbito, depicting him as vigorous and cheerful, and determined to live on out of sheer malice, so that the visitors, drawn there by

curiosity, felt at first glance somewhat disillusioned, when they saw before them a little old man, bent and emaciated, with a humble and reserved manner, who slipped out of sight with a brusqueness that was hardly polite. He avoided answering their questions, since the inquirers seemed to him to be making fun of the unfortunate lawyer, while Maràbito himself had nothing but praise for him, and indeed felt genuine sorrow for the loss that he quite unintentionally caused the lawyer, by continuing to drag on in possession of a life which brought him no satisfaction at all, but was a heavy burden to bear.

"Let me alone! I'm tired of it all," he would snap, in a state of depression and exasperation, when the women came to dislodge him from his cottage, where he took refuge as soon as he caught sight of some stranger on the Piazza di Santa Croce.

The neighbours meant well. It seemed to them a good omen that there should be such widespread curiosity concerning their ancient charge; it looked as if he had been made over to their care in order that a miracle might be worked. Hence they took pride in pointing him out to all comers:

"In a couple of days he'll be ninety-four! He's *never* going to die."

Some twenty years previously—that is when he had just come from the countryside to live in that

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cottage—those women had fair hair or dark and now they were all grey or white, while the old man remained just the same. For all of them the years had been added; but in his case only they had not. Many among them had died, including his next-door neighbour. One couldn't therefore say that the Angel of Death had not visited the little piazza—he had come and had behaved as if the old man's house didn't exist.

Maràbito listened with astonishment to the oft-repeated story, but whenever he heard the gossips going through the list of those who had died—all people younger than himself and still useful to their families—he fell into a silent fit of weeping. The tears trickled out of his withered little eyes that had lost all their lashes, and ran down deep furrows into his wrinkled and sunken mouth. He raised a trembling hand to his lips and rubbed the tears away with his gnarled fingers.

“And look at this girl here!” one of the women would quickly interpose, to distract the old man from his grief. She pointed at Annicchia, their other protégée. “When he came to live up here, this poor orphan was scarcely two years old. And now look what a great big girl she is! Grandad promised to bear her in mind, but for some time now he's been a naughty old man and behaved as if he didn't care for anyone.”

There had indeed grown up in Maràbito's mind a real obsession concerning his great age: he had actually begun to believe that death had expressly overlooked him in order to carry out the joke which they all talked about. Already—what with the money he had received from the Maltese and the sums which were still coming in to him from the lawyer—the farm had been paid for and well overpaid. Death, therefore, by leaving him still among the living, was amusing itself by making him behave dishonourably, was really making him a party to a swindle—that was what it amounted to. He couldn't bear the idea. All the village enjoyed the joke just as if he himself found pleasure in living on at someone else's expense. But it was quite otherwise—that was the one thing that he did not want to do. The care taken of his health and other kindly attentions of the women neighbours exasperated him. Perhaps they, too, laughed at him behind his back. He exposed himself to chills on purpose, went out in threatening weather on purpose, returned soaked through on purpose and rebelled when they called him a stupid old man and hustled him straight into his cottage to change his clothes and get into bed.

“Leave me alone! Let me die! That's what I'm trying to do! I'm tired of living——!”

Finally a suspicion grew up in his mind that some

occult power from beyond the grave was keeping him from dying—and that power was the tormented soul of Ciuzzo Pace. Yes, that must be it—Ciuzzo Pace was undoubtedly grieving over his farm, which he had lost for a trifling sum, and so was avenging himself by keeping Maràbito alive.

He was so convinced of this that he paid for a Mass every Sunday to hasten the relief of that soul from purgatory.

"If he is set free," he said, "I shall then be set free too."

The tale of what Maràbito had done and other such reports about him were passed on by the neighbours to enquiring visitors. These accounts reached the lawyer Zagara, who stood up for himself as best he could when people teased him about his bad bargain:

"You may well laugh at me," he would reply. "I deserve my losses and the laughs at my expense. Upon my soul, I deserve a good whipping! But don't you say a word against the old man, I beg you. Poor old fellow, he's really a very decent sort. I know all about him—he's shed tears over my well-deserved punishment. I owe him not merely gratitude, but something more for the way he's behaved, and I'll give it him. If he reaches the age of a hundred—as I sincerely hope he will—you're going to see a fine show, illuminations, fire-

works, a band and a feast that'll live in people's memories. I invite you all to it, here and now."

The lawyer had no relatives, either near or distant, and could well afford the pleasure of crowning his own stupidity with an expensive triumph. On one of the occasions on which the instalment of the annuity fell due, the old man did not appear. When he did not see him at his office, Zagara was really upset, and hurried to the Piazza Santa Croce for news of him.

When he got there, quite out of breath, he found Maràbito in his usual place, in front of his cottage door, sitting huddled together in a feeble ray of sunshine.

"So you've made the mountain come to you!" he said, as he let himself down very gently into a chair which one of the neighbours had hastened to offer him. "Well, how are you feeling? Why didn't you come to my office to-day?"

Before Maràbito could say anything, Z'a Milla, who had come up with a number of the neighbours, replied:

"Your Excellency asks why he did not go to you. I can tell you. It's because our old man is a stupid fellow—or he's gone out of his mind."

"Not a bit of it," said Maràbito frowning obstinately. "I'm not stupid and I've not gone out of my mind. I've reckoned it all out: the land which

your Excellency bought from me has been fully paid for, some time back. I'm a poor man, but I'm not dishonest. I won't take any more money from you."

Nocio Zagara looked at him a moment in surprise; then he said:

"My dear old man, you're even more of an ass than I am! I thank you for your words, but I cannot accept your offer. I've got to go on paying right up to the last centesimo and I shall do so with the greatest pleasure."

"But your Excellency knows," retorted Maràbito angrily, "that if I don't act as I propose, I cannot die. I tell you solemnly that if it had not been a sin, I should, some time back, have—have. . . . But your Excellency will see that death will come of its own accord as soon as I refuse to touch a single *soldo* of those sums to which in all conscience I am not entitled. I tell you again, I have already received for my farm more than it was worth."

"You haven't yet received as much as that from me," countered the lawyer. "It's fourteen years since I took up my cross in the form of supporting you, isn't that so? That means that up to date I've given you—see, here's the account, for I've reckoned it up, too—I have given you ten thousand, two hundred and twenty lire. Well, the farm was valued at twelve thousand lire; so I still

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have several more years to pay before I shall have paid its full value."

"But how about the sums I received from the Maltese—poor gentleman?" Maràbito asked.

"That's not my affair."

"I beg your pardon, but whose affair is it? Who arranged the deal? Was it me or was it your Honour? That's a bit too much! You mean to tell me that I'm not free to die?"

The lawyer raised his head with a half-serious, half-comic expression.

"No, not until I've paid the last centesimo of its value. If you want to die then, you are welcome to. I promise you that we'll have a great celebration when I've paid in full."

And he went away, leaving the money behind.

## CHAPTER IX

THE lawyer Zagara was a man of his word. On the morning of the great day the suburb of Ràbato was awakened by the lively strains of a march played by the municipal band on the way to the centenarian's dwelling. The cottage had been gaily decorated with banners and streamers, during the night, while Maràbito was asleep. In the little

piazza, stakes had been erected in readiness for a display of fireworks. Another surprise had been prepared by kind neighbours for their "dear little old man"—a new suit for the *festa*, cut out and sewn with their own hands.

On the heels of the band came hundreds of people pouring into the little square, but the cottage door was still shut.

"Three cheers for Maràbito! Come along, come outside, Maràbito!"

There was no answer. The door remained closed, though the neighbours hammered loudly with their hands and feet. The furious trumpet blasts and banging of the big drums combined with the shouts and cheers to make such a deafening noise that it was in vain that one or two persons, inspired by the anxiety of the nearest residents, made gestures calling for quiet, wanting people to wait until the old man opened his door and gave signs of life.

All at once there was a fresh outburst from the crowd:

"Three cheers for the lawyer!"

Nocio Zagara, quite the tallest person present, waved his arms in gestures of thanks, still holding his silk hat in one hand. Those cheers were going to cost him a goodly sum of money, but anyhow there was no ridicule in them that day. The people

were delighted by this unusual festival and grateful to him for providing it. The Maltese, for sure, would not have given a festival for the occasion.

Neither would the lawyer have given it, if he could have guessed that it would cause the old man such pain and depression. He only discovered that, when he had managed to force his way through the crowd to the cottage door. There he cleared a space and instructed the neighbours to guard the entrance to prevent a disorderly crowd from entering; then he thumped on the door with his stick and shouted.

At last the old man opened. His appearance was greeted by louder cheers and shouts from the crowd.

"Why? What's the matter?" exclaimed Don Nocio, seeing Maràbito shaking like an aspen and dissolved in tears. "Here's the whole town come to honour you, and you are weeping! Is that how you thank me for arranging a great *festa* for your hundredth birthday?"

The difficulty was to disabuse his mind of the suspicion that the celebrations had been arranged in order to make a mock of him. And when, eventually, the lawyer managed to get him to shew himself at the little window over the door of his cottage and the crowd greeted his appearance with

loud hurrahs, the old man was still weeping and shaking his head mournfully.

Annicchia and some of the other women brought him his new suit and dressed him. Then they all went to the church of Santa Croce to attend Mass. The lawyer insisted on going too, saying that it was the first time he had ever done so and would be the last.

Their departure from the church was the signal for drums to be sounded. Squibs and crackers exploded everywhere.

At last the hour for the banquet arrived. Nocio Zagara had hired for the occasion a shop which consisted of an enormously long room, on the ground floor. A table ran from one end to the other. At one end sat the lawyer's friends, and at the other the residents of the quarter. Maràbito was lifted up, almost forcibly, and carried in triumph to the post of honour next to Signor Zagara. Confused and stunned by the hubbub, the old man turned his head slowly from one guest to another as they called to him with uplifted glasses expressing the hope that he would live yet another hundred years. He merely nodded his head as a sign of thanks, and sat there without a smile, the only person neither eating nor drinking. At the beginning, some members of the party had pressed him to join in the feast, but the lawyer had

persuaded them to abandon the attempt. To Maràbito it seemed that the celebration was for the others, not for himself. He was there simply as a representative of a hundred years' longevity, a hundred years which no longer had any meaning for him. When he thought of the reason for the *festa*, all that merry-making seemed to him such a miserable mockery of his frame of mind that he was on the point of collapse. And then in addition they called upon the old man for a speech; he had to propose a toast—he must speak at least a couple of words. They were so insistent that at last he rose to his feet, holding his glass shakily in his hand.

"What am I to say to you? God only knows how ashamed I feel. I hereby thank this my benefactor. The only other thing I have to say is that notice should be given throughout the town that when the Angel of Death comes to anyone's house, the people there should tell him that, at the Piazza Santa Croce, there's an old man who has been waiting for him for many years—and that he should come and take him away. . . ."

At that point, Maràbito's speech was interrupted by a sudden disturbance: during the loud laughter with which his remarks were greeted, some of the guests had noticed the lawyer suddenly grow pale; a moment later his huge head fell forward upon his

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breast. All turned to look, then rose from their seats and crowded round Signor Zagara. They thought at first that the unfortunate lawyer had been taken suddenly ill from an excess of wine and laughter and excitement. Amid a scene of general confusion Nocio Zagara was carried in his chair to a neighbouring house, a crowd of guests pressing round to lend a hand. His eyes were shut and his mouth open, and he was breathing with much difficulty—and with a rattle in his throat.

The long hall was suddenly empty—the table in disorder and the chairs overthrown. No one noticed the poor centenarian lying there. He had fallen on the floor, attacked by a convulsive fit of trembling, as he was trying to accompany the others and follow after the man whom he had described as his benefactor only a few seconds before.

## CHAPTER X

THERE was an occasional spot on the quavering, outstretched hand; then—still barely perceptible—the rustle of the first drops on the vine-leaves, half-yellow from the drought. Ah, there it came—the drops were much more frequent now and there was a loud continuous patter.

"Is it raining, grandpa?"

Old Maràbito nodded several times, with a smile towards Nociorello\*, the small boy seated beside him on the threshold of the house which the Maltese had erected on the site of the old farm.

Grigoli and Annicchia, who had been husband and wife for the past four years, were out in the fields belonging to the farm—now once again Maràbito's property since the lawyer's death. Grigoli was busy climbing the olive trees and beating down the fruit, while Annicchia gathered it from the ground. The poor girl was going to have another baby, and the old man would gladly have been out there helping his adopted daughter, for he no longer felt the burden of his years, though he had turned a hundred and five. But the married couple had refused to allow it, and had left him in charge of the child, whom they had called after the dead lawyer, as a mark of their gratitude towards him.

"Where's Mummy, grandpa?" Nociorello kept asking. The child was frightened by the shower.

"She'll soon come back," replied the old man. "Don't mind the rain. The ground is thirsty and this is the right sort of shower."

From far and near came the joyful crowing of the cocks announcing the change of season. The

\* Little Nocio.

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larks still lingered on the plateau, undecided as to whether the heavy banks of clouds really meant business. Occasionally they interchanged brief trills as if asking one another:

“Shall we be off?”



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“A DEAD ’un, my dear fellow, dead though he is, wants to have a house of his own. And if he’s a well-to-do corpse, he wants his home to be a fine one. And he’s quite right too. If he’s to be comfortable in it, he wants it to be of marble, with nice decorations on it. And then, if the dead man has pots of money to splash about, he must have some profound . . . what d’you call it? . . . allegory . . . that’s the word . . . some profound allegory designed by a great sculptor like myself . . . a handsome stone with an inscription in Latin. *Hic Jacet* . . . then what he was, what he wasn’t . . . and a pretty little garden all round with some vegetables and the rest of it, and an elegant railing to keep the dogs off and . . .”

“Oh! shut up! You bore me stiff!” shouted Constantino Pogliani, turning round with his face all flushed and shining with sweat.

Ciro Colli raised his head from his breast, revealing a goatee beard pulled and twisted into the shape of a hook. He contemplated Pogliani in silence, peering out from beneath the sugar-loaf hat which projected above his nose; then spoke with

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great deliberation and conviction, summing up his opinion of his friend in the single word "Ass."

That settled the matter.

He was lounging back on the sofa with his long legs wide apart, sprawled across the rug which Pogliani had beaten well and arranged tidily in front of the sofa a few minutes before.

Pogliani struggled against his irritation at the sight of his friend lolling so comfortably there, whilst he himself was taking such pains to tidy up his studio, arranging the busts so that they would cut the best possible figures. He removed his failures to the back—plaster studies, all dusty and yellow, which had found their way home to him after each exhibition—and arranged in front, with elaborate care, the stands on which stood his future exhibits; they were still shrouded in damp cloths. Finally he said with a snort of impatience:

"Now then, are you going? Yes or no?"

"No."

"Well, anyhow don't sit sprawling there, for God's sake, in the part I've tidied up. I tell you I'm expecting some ladies."

"I don't believe you."

"Here's the letter. Look! It came yesterday from Commander Seralli: "Dear friend, I write to let you know that to-morrow, at about eleven——"

"Is it eleven already?"

"Past eleven!"

"I don't believe you. Go on!"

"You will receive a visit from the Signora Con . . . what's that word?"

"Confucius."

"Cont . . . or Consalvi, I can't read it properly, and her daughter, who want you to do some work for them. I am confident that . . . etc., etc."

"You didn't by any chance write it yourself—that letter?" asked *Ciro Colli*, dropping his head on his breast again.

"Idiot," exclaimed *Pogliani*. He almost groaned in exasperation, hesitating between laughter and tears.

*Colli* raised one finger in reproof.

"Don't call me that. I resent it. For if I were really an idiot, do you know the kind of person I'd be? I'd be the kind of person who looks down on others pityingly. I'd be well-dressed, well-shod, with a pretty tie . . . the colour of *heliopro* . . . *heliotro* . . . what d'you call it? . . . *helio-trope*, and a velvet waistcoat—like yours. . . . Ah, how I'd love to have a velvet waistcoat like yours—wretched down-and-out that I am. Listen. I'll tell you what we'll do and it'll be well worth your while to do as I tell you. If it is true that these *Confucius* females are coming here, let's make the studio all untidy again, or they'll get a very poor impression of you. It'll be much better for them to

find you all absorbed in your work, with sweat . . . how do they put it? . . . with bread . . . I mean with the sweat of your bread on your brow. Take a good chunk of clay, dump it on the stand and do your best to give it a rough resemblance to myself lolling here. We'll call it 'The Toiler.' Mark my word—the National Gallery will buy it on the spot. My shoes . . . yes, they're far from new; but you can make them brand new if you want, for, without flattering you, I may say that, as a sculptor, you're a jolly good cobbler."

Constantino Pogliani paid no attention; he was busy hanging some cartoons on the walls. In his eyes Colli was one of life's failures, an obstinate survival of a past era, of a fashion now abandoned in artistic circles—slovenly and neglected in his appearance, slack, and with a tendency to idleness that had eaten into his bones. It was the greatest of pities, for when he was in the mood to work, he could give points to the best of them. He, Pogliani, knew something about that: on how many occasions, when he had been vainly struggling to express a likeness, had his friend come into the studio and finished off the work with a few energetic touches of his thumb, applied almost contemptuously. But Colli ought to have studied, even if it were only a little of the history of the art of sculpture. And he should have lived a more regular life and paid some

attention to his personal appearance. Really, with all these boring ideas and dressed in that get-up, he was an insufferable fellow. Why, he—Pogliani—had put in a couple of years at the University and he was now making his way in his profession, as could be clearly seen. . . .

At that moment two quiet raps on the door made him jump down from the stool on which he stood hanging up his sketches.

"Well? What about it?" he said to Colli, shaking his fist at him.

"I'll go when they've come in," replied his friend, making no movement to rise. "Don't be so high and mighty. You might at least introduce me, you selfish brute."

Pogliano smoothed back the fair, curly hair from his forehead, and hurried to open the door.

. . . . .

Signora Consalvi entered the room followed by her daughter, a young girl dressed in deep mourning, her face hidden by a heavy crepe veil. She had in her hand a long roll of paper. The mother wore a pretty, pale grey dress which fitted her shapely figure to perfection. Her hair was as grey as her dress, but it was arranged in a youthful style and set off by an attractive little hat trimmed with violets.

Signora Consalvi's appearance shewed plainly that she fully realised that she was still handsome and attractive despite her years. When the daughter raised her veil on to her hat, it was evident she was not less handsome, though pale and dejected in her deep mourning.

After the first conventional sentences, Pogliani had no alternative but to introduce Colli who was still lounging there with his hands in his pockets, his ugly hat tilted on to his nose and an extinct cigarette between his lips. He shewed no signs of leaving.

"Signor Colli? *Ciro Colli*? A sculptor?" asked Signorina Consalvi, blushing suddenly with a look of surprise.

"A sculptor? Why not? Yes, I'm a sculptor too," replied Colli, standing at attention and taking off his hat, disclosing bushy eyebrows which met, and eyes very close to his nose.

Signorina Consalvi seemed embarrassed and annoyed. "But I was told that you were no longer in Rome," she said.

"Oh! I'm here, all right. I'm on holiday, so to speak, Signorina. First I was an idler permanently resident in Rome, because I'd won a scholarship and found my way to this paradise, and then . . ."

Signorina Consalvi glanced at her mother, who was smiling, and said to her:

"What's to be done?"

"Should I go away?" asked Colli.

"No, no, on the contrary," the signorina hastened to reply. "I beg you to stay here, because . . ."

"What a coincidence!" exclaimed the mother. Then turning to Pogliani, she added, "But it'll be put right somehow. . . . You two are friends, aren't you?"

"The closest of friends," answered Pogliani promptly.

"So close," interposed Colli, "that he was trying to kick me out a few minutes ago."

"Do shut up!" said Pogliani in an undertone. "Ladies," he continued, "please sit down and tell me the reason for your visit."

"Well, it's this way," began Signora Consalvi, seating herself on the sofa. "My poor daughter has had the great misfortune to lose her fiancé—quite suddenly."

"How tragic!"

"Oh!"

"It's been a terrible blow! On the very eve of her wedding—imagine it. . . . He died of an accident out shooting. Perhaps you read about it in the papers? Giulio Sorini."

"Oh! Sorini, yes," said Pogliani. "It said in the paper that his gun went off——"

"At the beginning of last month . . . no, the month before . . . I mean to say it's three months ago now. The poor man was a distant relation of ours, the son of one of my cousins who went off to America after his wife died. Well, you see, Giulietta (my daughter's name is Giulia also)——"

Here Pogliani made a graceful bow.

"Giulietta," the mother continued, "thought of erecting a monument in the Verano\* in memory of her fiancé—there is only a provisional tomb at present—and she had certain ideas of her own as to the form this monument should take; for my daughter, I may tell you, has always had a great talent for sketching."

"No . . . hardly that," interrupted the girl in mourning, speaking timidly, with her eyes cast down. "It has just been a pastime, that's all."

"I beg your pardon, but didn't poor Giulio also wish you to take lessons——"

"Mother, please!" insisted Giulietta. "I saw in an illustrated magazine a sketch for a tombstone monument by this gentleman here . . . by Signor Colli, which greatly attracted me, and . . ."

"Yes, that is the point of our visit," added her mother, anxious to help her out as she seemed to be hesitating.

\* The principal cemetery in Rome.

"But," continued the daughter, "I thought of making a modification of it. . . ."

"Would you mind telling me which one it was," asked Colli. "I've done several of those tombstone sketches, in the hope of at least getting some orders from the dead, seeing that the living——"

"Excuse me, Signorina," broke in Pogliani, a little annoyed at finding himself thus put on one side. "Have you thought out a monument based on one of my friend's sketches?"

"No, not exactly that . . . no, this is how it is," replied the girl with animation. "Signor Colli's sketch represents Death drawing Life to him—if I am not mistaken . . ."

"Ah! I know the one you mean," exclaimed Colli. "A skeleton in a shroud, isn't that it? One can just make him out, rigid, through the folds of the sheet. He is clutching hold of Life—a handsome bit of a girl—who doesn't want to have anything to do with him. Yes, yes . . . very beautiful. Magnificent! That's the sketch you mean."

Signora Consalvi was unable to refrain from smiling, astonished at the conceit of that extraordinary-looking artist.

"Modest, isn't he?" Pogliani remarked to her. "Quite an unusual type."

"Come, Giulia," she said to her daughter. "Per-

haps it would be better if you were to shew your sketch without further preliminaries."

"Wait, mother," begged the girl. "It would be better to explain the position to Signor Pogliani first quite frankly. It's like this: when the idea of the monument first came to me, I must admit that I thought at once of entrusting the commission to Signor Colli. That was because of his sketch. But I was told, as I mentioned before, that you were no longer in Rome," she added, turning to Colli. "So then I did my best to adapt his sketch myself to my own idea and my feelings, that is to modify it so that it would express my own case and my intentions. Am I making myself plain?"

"Wonderfully so," agreed Pogliani with enthusiasm.

"I left the two statues of Death and Life," the girl proceeded, "but I removed altogether the idea of his forcible seizure of her. That was the change I made. In my modification of the sketch, Death no longer clutches at Life, but she—quite resigned to her fate—is accepting him in marriage."

"She marries him!" said Pogliani in a tone of surprise and concern.

"What next!" shouted Colli. "The idea of Life marrying Death!"

"She marries Death," the girl insisted with a

modest smile. "And, further, I have tried to make it clear symbolically that a wedding is intended. The skeleton stands rigid, just as Signor Colli made it, but from between the folds of the winding sheet comes out one of its hands, only just visible. It holds the wedding ring. And Life, looking modest and timid, presses up against the skeleton and holds out her hand to receive the ring."

"Splendid! Magnificent! I see it," Colli broke out. "But this is another idea—stupendous! Quite another motif, altogether different. Stupendous! The ring . . . the finger. Magnificent!"

"Well, yes, it is a bit different, I agree," added the girl, with a blush at his enthusiastic praise. "But it cannot be denied that I have taken advantage of your sketch and that . . ."

"Don't you worry about that," exclaimed Colli. "Your idea is a much finer one than mine, and it's your own. As for mine, God only knows whose idea it was. . . ."

Signorina Consalvi raised her shoulders and lowered her eyes again.

"To tell the truth," broke in her mother with a gesture of impatience, "I am allowing my daughter to carry out her wishes, but I must say that her idea doesn't please me in the least."

"Mother, please!" repeated the daughter. Then turning to Pogliani, she continued: "Well, a few

days ago, I asked the advice of Commander Seralli, who is an old friend of ours . . .”

“He was to have been one of the witnesses at the wedding,” added her mother with a sigh.

“And the Commander mentioned your name,” continued the girl, “so we came to you to ask——”

“No, no, excuse me, Signorina,” Pogliani hastened to reply. “Since you have found my friend here . . .”

“Oh, stow all that! You’re getting on my nerves,” broke out Colli with an angry shrug of the shoulders.

He was making for the door, when Pogliani caught him by the arm and held him back, saying:

“Look here! Don’t you understand? The Signorina only came to me because she believed that you were not in Rome.”

“But she’s changed the whole design!” cried Colli, struggling to get free. “Let me go! What’s it got to do with me? She’s come to *you*. My excuses, Signorina, Signora. Good day.”

“Now listen!” said Pogliani in a determined tone, without relaxing his hold. “I’m not going to accept the commission. You also refuse. That means that neither of us will do the work . . .”

“But—excuse me—why not together, then?” the mother intervened. “Couldn’t you do it together?”

"I'm most distressed to have been the cause . . ." the girl hastened to add.

"Not at all," said Colli and Pogliani simultaneously.

Colli continued: "I have no further concern with the case, Signorina. And then—you see—I no longer have a studio. I'm no longer fit to execute a commission. The only thing I can be counted on doing is to abuse everyone all round. So you must absolutely compel this lunatic here——"

"It's no use, you know," said Pogliani. "Either we do the work together, as the Signora proposes or I do not accept the commission."

"Just a moment, Signorina," Colli then remarked, stretching out his hand towards the roll of paper which still lay beside her on the sofa. "I'm positively dying to see your sketch. When I've seen it . . ."

"Oh! Please don't expect to see anything marvellous," Signorina Consalvi murmured, and opened out the roll with shaking fingers. "I hardly know how to hold a pencil. . . . I've just drawn a few lines to express my idea. . . . It's a very amateurish effort . . . look!"

"*Clothed?*" exclaimed Colli at once, in a shocked voice.

"How do you mean? Why not clothed?" asked the girl, anxiously, and a little frightened.

"I beg your pardon! No!" rejoined Colli in a heated tone. "You've drawn the statue of Life dressed in a chemise . . . or we can call it a tunic. . . . It won't do! No, I tell you, nude, nude, nude! Life's got to be *nude*, Signorina—stark naked."

"Excuse me," faltered Signorina Consalvi, "but I should like you to look at the sketch more attentively."

"Oh yes, I can see that," replied Colli, almost shouting. "You meant to depict yourself—to draw your own portrait for the figure of Life. (I may add in passing that you are much better looking.) But now we are in the domain of Art and this sketch is meant to stand for Life marrying Death. Well, the skeleton is draped, so the figure of Life must be nude, that's obvious—stark naked and very beautiful, Signorina, to make up by its contrast for the gloomy figure of the shrouded skeleton. Nude, Pogliani, don't you think so? Nude, Signora, isn't that so? Stark naked, Signorina—absolutely stark, from head to foot! Believe me, otherwise it'll look just like a scene in a hospital—one figure draped in a sheet, and the other in a bathrobe. We've got to produce a work of art, Signorina, and there can be no possible argument about it."

"No, no—I'm very sorry. . . ." said Signorina Consalvi, as she and her mother stood up. "Per-

haps you are right from the standpoint of art. I won't argue about that, but I have endeavoured to say something through my sketch, and it can only be said in the way I have done it. If I adopted your suggestion, I should have to renounce the message I am trying to convey."

"But why would you? I don't agree. Your mistake is that you are regarding your body as a personal thing and not as a symbol. You can't maintain that the sketch is beautiful treated like that."

"No, I don't claim that it is beautiful," she replied. "But the point is just exactly what you have said: I have not meant to portray the figure as a symbol, but as my own person, my own case—my intentions for the future. And I can only do that in my way. You see . . . well, think of the place where the monument is to be erected. . . . No, I really couldn't stand the idea of Life being . . . as you say . . ."

Colli threw open his arms and hunched up his shoulders with a gesture of disapproval. "It's just imagination on your part——"

With a sweet and very sad smile, the girl corrected him:

"Say rather a sentiment which must be respected."

The two artists agreed that they would make all

arrangements with Commander Seralli and, shortly afterwards, Signora Consalvi and the girl in mourning took their departure.

Ciro Colli burst into song and strode up and down the studio, rubbing his hands in delight.

. . . . .

About a week later, Constantino Pogliani called at the Consalvis' house to ask the girl to give some sittings for the modelling of the head.

He had learned from Commander Seralli (who was on terms of the closest and most intimate friendship with Signora Consalvi), that Sorini had lived on for three days after his terrible accident and that he had then bequeathed to his fiancée the whole of the enormous fortune he had inherited from his father. Therefore no expense was to be spared in the erection of the monument.

The Commander had declared that he was *épuisé*—having been overwhelmed by the worries, troubles and annoyances which had resulted from that accident—worries, troubles and annoyances which had been aggravated by the behaviour of Signorina Consalvi. Poor girl, she was indeed greatly to be pitied, but she was so *emportée*—that was the word for her. Good heavens! it really seemed as if she found a keen pleasure in intensifying her grief. Oh! it had been a terrible *choc*—

no one could deny it—a regular thunderbolt out of a clear sky. And he was such a fine young fellow—Sorini—good-looking too, poor chap, and head over heels in love with her. There was no doubt he would have made her happy. Perhaps that was why he had been snatched away.

It almost sounded as if he had been so fine a fellow and snatched away solely in order to add to the troubles of Commander Seralli. Would you believe it? Why, the girl flatly refused to part with the house which he—the fiancé—had made all ready for her reception. It was a real love-nest, *un joli rêve de luxe et de bien-être*. She had taken all her beautiful trousseau there, and she spent a great part of each day in that house, not in tears—no! but torturing herself in dreaming of the life she was to have led as a bride, the life so unfortunately torn from her—*arraché*.

In fact, Pogliani did not find Signorina Consalvi at her home. The maid gave him the address of the new house, in the Via di Porta Pinciano. As he walked there, Pogliani began to think over the bitter-sweet anguish which the poor girl must be experiencing—a bride widowed before the wedding, feeding her soul on the dream of the life which she would have lived in that very spot, had not Fate at the last moment prevented the dream from becoming a reality.

What promises of bliss must lie in each piece of furniture, chosen with such loving care by the engaged couple and joyously arranged in that house, which in a few days was to become their home. All those objects left standing, just as they had been arranged, full of sweet memories, desires, promises and hopes. . . . How cruel for the bride—and on a day like this too, thought Pogliani with a sigh.

He could clearly feel the first breath of spring in the air, the warmth in the sunshine. It gave him a feeling of exhilaration. There in the new house with its windows open to the spring sunshine he would find Giulietta Consalvi—God knows what torture her dreams were bringing her on such a day as this.

When he entered, she was sitting before an easel, busy on a sketch of her fiancé, diffidently copying the likeness from a small photograph and enlarging it. Her mother was passing the time reading a French novel, borrowed from Commander Seralli's library.

In point of fact, Signorina Consalvi would have preferred to be alone, there in her "love-nest" which had become the scene of a tragedy. Her mother's presence was embarrassing. But the Signora feared that her daughter's romantic disposition might lead her to commit some desperate

act, and she insisted on accompanying her during her visits to the house. She was exasperated by the girl's obstinate indulgence in her grief, and fumed inwardly as she sat there, refraining from open criticism only with the utmost difficulty.

Signora Consalvi had been left penniless when still a young woman—a widow with this one daughter—and had been quite unable to adopt the attitude of regarding her life's happiness as shut off for ever behind bars with her grief as sentinel, as her daughter seemed determined to do. She did not hold that Giulietta ought not to mourn for the cruel blow which Fate had dealt her, but she did believe—and her dear and intimate friend Commander Seralli shared the belief—that . . . well . . . that she exaggerated her grief somewhat. She thought that her daughter was taking advantage of the fact that her unfortunate fiancé had left her a very large fortune and was therefore indulging herself in the luxury of this unrestrained emotion. She herself had had a bitter experience of the hateful realities of life; she remembered how, when she was still grief-stricken at her husband's death, she had had to pass through terrible straits in the struggle to make both ends meet, and she considered that her daughter was having a much easier time in her bereavement. Her own sad experiences made her regard her child's abandonment to her

grief as a pardonable indulgence—yes, almost excusable in the circumstances—but only on condition that it did not last too long . . . *voilà*, as her dear and intimate friend Commander Seralli always said.

As a sensible, experienced woman, with a knowledge of the world, she had already tried on more than one occasion to induce her daughter to shew moderation in her emotions, but in vain. Her Giulietta was too romantic. It was probably not so much that she was overcome by a feeling of grief, but that she was obsessed by the *idea* of it. If so, this was a great misfortune: for a feeling must necessarily grow less powerful with the passage of time—there was no doubt about that—but with an idea, it was quite the contrary; it became fixed. It was that *idée fixe* of her grief which led her to commit such absurdities as the proposal to erect a funeral monument shewing Life marrying Death (a fine idea for a marriage ceremony!). Also there was that other fantastic proposal—to keep the house of the bridal couple exactly as it had been prepared, so that it should retain the suggestion of a dream which had almost become a reality, of the married life which she had been unable to enjoy.

Signora Consalvi was delighted that Pogliani had come to call on them.

The sunshine poured in through the open windows. Outside was a view of the Villa Borghese with its great green meadows and its splendid forest of pines rising high into the intensely blue spring sky. It was a delightful prospect.

As Pogliani entered, the Signorina rose and endeavoured to put away her sketch unseen, but he restrained her, with gentle force.

"Why? Won't you let me see it?"

"Oh, I've only just begun it."

"Well, you've made an excellent start," he exclaimed, bending down to examine it. "Very good indeed! . . . It's Sorini, isn't it? . . . Yes, now I think I remember his face well, when I see that photograph. Yes, yes, I recognise him. . . . But did he wear a beard?"

"No," the girl hastened to reply, "he didn't—not for some time."

"Ah! I thought not. . . . A very good-looking man—very."

"I can't get on with my sketch," the girl continued, "because this photograph doesn't correspond—it's not really like the mental picture I have of him."

"Yes, I know what you mean," Pogliani promptly agreed. "He was more—much more . . . animated—that's the word—he looked much more alive."

"That photo was taken in America," remarked

the mother. "Of course that was some time before he was engaged to my daughter."

"And I haven't any other photograph," said the girl in a melancholy tone. "Look! I shut my eyes, like this, and I can see him just exactly as he was before the accident; but as soon as I start drawing him, I can no longer visualise his face. Then I look at the photo and immediately it seems to me that it's a living image of him. But when I try to do the sketch, I can no longer see the likeness in the photo. I'm in despair about it."

"Look, Giulia," her mother broke in, her eyes fixed on Pogliani. "You were speaking of the outline of the chin—you wanted to remove the beard. Don't you think that Signor Pogliani's chin . . ."

He blushed and smiled. Almost involuntarily he held up his chin, as if presenting it to Signorina Consalvi for her to pick it up gently and put it in her picture of Sorini.

The Signorina was confused and embarrassed, and hardly raised her eyes to look at him. (Surely her mother might have shewn more consideration for her bereavement than to speak like that.)

"And the moustache too, look!" added Signora Consalvi, without any ulterior motive. "Poor Giulio wore a moustache just like that during his last few months, don't you think?"

The Signorina was hurt. "We weren't discussing

moustaches," she said coldly. "I'm not going to draw a moustache."

"No, certainly not," agreed Pogliani, but he instinctively stroked his own moustache and smiled.

Then he went up to the easel and said:

"Look! If you'll permit me, I'll try to make you see his likeness, Signorina. . . . Just a few strokes, here in the corner of your sketch. . . . You won't mind that, will you? You can rub it out after. I want to shew you how I remember poor Sorini."

He sat down, and with the help of the photograph, began to draw the head of her fiancé. Signorina Consalvi followed his rapid strokes with intense interest. Her whole soul seemed absorbed and anxiously expectant. As the work proceeded, she uttered exultant cries from time to time, which encouraged and almost guided his pencil. At last she could no longer restrain her emotion but called out:

"Look, oh, *do* look, mother! There he is! Exactly! Oh, don't alter anything. . . . Thank you so much. . . . How wonderful to be able to draw like that! . . . It's perfect, absolutely perfect. . . ."

"It only wants a little practice," said Pogliani, as he rose from the seat. He spoke modestly enough, but plainly shewed the pleasure which her exuberant praise gave him. . . . "Besides—you see—I remember him so well, poor Sorini."

Signorina Consalvi was still gazing at the sketch, as if she could never see all she wanted of it.

"The chin . . . yes . . . you've got it right, exactly right. . . . Oh! thank you a thousand times."

At that moment, the photograph of Sorini which had served as a model slipped from the easel and the Signorina, still entirely taken up with admiration for Pogliani's sketch, did not stoop to pick it up again.

There it lay on the floor, that rather faded picture—looking very melancholy, as if it understood that it was never to be picked up again.

Pogliani, however, stooped and picked it up and held it out to her politely.

"Thank you," said the Signorina, "but now I shall make use of your drawing. So I shan't need to look at that ugly photo any more, you see."

At that moment she raised her eyes and it came upon her with a flash that the room was brighter than it had been. She looked out through the big french windows, which opened on to the enchanting spectacle of the magnificent villa and its gardens, and drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The joyous light of that perfect day penetrated to the depths of her heart which had for so long been weighed down by grief. It seemed as if that brief explosion of admiration had instantaneously dispelled the

oppression and left her intoxicated by the feeling of relief.

It lasted only a second. Signorina Consalvi was quite unable to explain to herself what had happened within her. She had the sudden impression that among all those new objects she herself had also become new—new and free, no longer in the toils of the nightmare which had been stifling her until a few seconds before. Something, some breath of life, had entered violently through that open window and caused a tumultuous upheaval in her heart. It almost seemed as if it had infused with radiant life all those inanimate objects which surrounded her, which hitherto she had determined to regard as lifeless, and which she would not allow to be touched or moved in order that they might help her to keep vigil over a dream that had died.

She listened to the conversation between the very elegant sculptor and her mother, and heard him express his admiration of the house and of the beauty of the view—what a charming voice he had! The mother proposed that he should look at the other rooms and the girl followed them about in a state of strange perturbation. Had that young man, still quite a stranger, really entered into her dead dream, to bring it to life again?

This new impression was so strong that when they reached the bedroom she felt it impossible for her

to cross the threshold. She noticed her mother and the young man exchange a meaning glance and, unable to restrain herself any longer, broke into a loud fit of sobbing.

Her tears flowed freely, springing from the same grief that had so often overpowered her before; but she noticed in some vague way that this time there was a difference in her weeping, that the sound of her sobs no longer called up within her the echo of her original woe, no longer aroused the images which they had always presented to her. She perceived this the more clearly when her mother hastened to her side to console as she had so frequently done, using the same expressions and repeating her advice to be brave. She could not stand such comforting but made a violent effort and stopped her fit of weeping. She felt grateful to the young man, when he tried to distract her from her sorrow by asking her to shew him her album of sketches which he had noticed on a bookstand.

He praised her attempts in well-measured, sincere terms, gave her suggestions and pointed out mistakes. His questions led her on to explanations and a discussion ensued. He ended by advising her strongly to undertake serious study and to develop her artistic capacity which, he assured her, was quite out of the common. It would be a sin to neglect it, a real sin! Had she never tried working in colour?

Never? Really! Why not? It wouldn't be at all difficult for her, seeing that she had had so much practice at sketching and shewn such enthusiasm for it.

Constantino Pogliani offered to initiate her in the art of painting. Signorina Consalvi accepted. It was arranged that the lessons were to start on the morrow—there, in the new house which waited with glad expectancy for them.

. . . . .

Nearly two months later *Ciro Colli* lay sprawling on the sofa in Pogliani's studio, which was already cluttered up with a colossal graveyard monument, still only roughly outlined. He wore an old cotton blouse which he had pinned between his legs. As he smoked his pipe he carried on a strange conversation with a skeleton standing upright on a black wooden stool in front of him. He had borrowed it for a model from a friend who was a doctor.

On the skull he had stuck a paper cap, slightly askew, and the skeleton looked like a private soldier standing at attention, listening to the instructions which *Ciro Colli*, the sculptor-corporal, was giving him between one puff of smoke and the next.

"Now *why* did you have to go out shooting, old man? D'you see what an awful mess it's got you

into? That's why you're such an ugly devil now . . . legs like sticks . . . the whole of you just a bunch of bones. Now—speaking seriously—do you think this wedding of yours can possibly come off? Look at Life standing there, my dear fellow; look what a fine big lump of a girl I've made of her. Do you really flatter yourself that she's willing to marry you? She's nestled up against you, as sweet and modest as can be. She's shed tears by the bucketful. But when it comes to taking the wedding ring—there's nothing doing! You just get the idea out of your head. . . . Why not try spending money on her, old man—emptying your purse on her? What! You've already given her your purse and all there was in it? Then what d'you expect me to do for you now? It's no use your telling me about the mess you're in. I knew what would happen. It's a wicked world and there's no one you can rely on. . . . Of course you know what's happened now, don't you? She's started studying painting—Life has—and who do you suppose is her teacher? Constantino Pogliani! Now that's a bit thick, old man—it's beyond a joke. If I were in your place I should challenge him to a duel. . . . Did you hear what happened this morning? You know I had strict orders—she doesn't want, she absolutely prohibits me from doing Life in the nude. Well, he—ass though he is

—is after all a sculptor, and he knows perfectly that you can't do a figure with clothes on, until you've done it first in the nude. Now just listen to what happened. He won't have his girl's face on that wonderful nude figure of Life I've done. So he comes in—didn't you see him?—and jumps up on the stand and with a couple of strokes of the trowel he wipes out the whole of the face I'd given her. Do you know why he did that, my lad? I shouted at him, "Stop it! I'm going to put clothes on her in half a moment. I'll dress her up all right." But not the slightest use! They want Life naked now . . . it's to be nude Life, as nude and as crude as Life can be! They've come back to my original sketch . . . the figure of Life is to be a symbol, and the idea of making it the girl's statue has been scrapped altogether! Now it's to be you clutching at her, my fine fellow, and she refusing to have anything to do with you! . . . Ah! Just you tell me now—why on earth did you have to go out shooting?"



# THE WAYSIDE SHRINE



# THE WAYSIDE SHRINE

## CHAPTER I

SPATOLINO lay beside his wife who was already asleep, with her face turned towards the small bed where the two children lay side by side. He said his usual prayers, then clasped his hands behind his neck and blinked into the darkness. After a time, without thinking what he was doing, he began to whistle quietly to himself. It was a habit he had when worried or absorbed in thought.

*"Fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi . . ."* Not so much a whistle as a gentle hissing through the teeth, very soft, and always on the same note.

It was not long before his wife awoke with a start.

"What are you doing? What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Go to sleep. Good night."

He turned his back on his wife and settled down on his side to try to sleep; but it was hopeless.

*"Fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi . . ."*

His wife punched him in the back.

"Oh! Stop it! You'll wake the children next!"

"I'm sorry. You're right. Don't worry, I'll go to sleep."

He made heroic efforts to drive away the thought that was worrying him with the persistence of a chirping cricket; but no sooner did he think he had got rid of it, than:

*"Fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi . . ."*

This time he did not wait for his wife to hit him—the second blow was always more violent than the first—but jumped out of bed in a state of exasperation.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" she whispered crossly.

"Can't you see I'm putting on my clothes? I can't sleep. I want some air—more air. I'm going to sit in the street outside."

"What on earth's come over you?" asked his wife. "What's the matter? Tell me at once what's happened."

"It's that rascal, that scoundrel, that enemy of the Lord . . ." he replied, restraining himself with difficulty from speaking out loud.

"Who? Who d'you mean?"

"Why! Ciancarella, of course."

"The lawyer?"

"Yes, that's the man. He's sent word that he wants to see me to-morrow at his villa."

"Well?"

## THE WAYSIDE SHRINE

"Well, what I'd like to know is what a man of that kind can have to say to me. He's a swine, that's what he is—a swine, even though he may have been christened. . . . I don't like it, I tell you, and I want some air—more air. . . ."

With this parting speech he opened the door, picked one of the chairs, and placed it outside in the silent street: then shut the door again and settled down in his chair resting his head against the wall of his cottage.

A feeble oil lamp flickered from a wall near by. Its yellow rays showed a stretch of cobbled pavement, worn by time into a succession of ridges and hollows. The light was reflected in a stagnant pool of water—if indeed the liquid was anything as clean as water.

From the inside of the dark, shadowy cottages came a strong smell of stables and from time to time the stamping of some animal tormented by flies. A cat sneaking along by the wall stopped and gave him a wary, sidelong glance. Spatolino sat looking up at the stars which shone in the narrow strip of sky above his head. He pulled at his scanty little reddish beard, twisting up the hairs into his mouth. He was a small, stunted man, for all his life since he was a boy he had worked as a builder, carrying heavy loads of clay and mortar, but there was something gentlemanly about his appearance.

Suddenly his blue eyes, staring up at the heavens, filled with tears. He moved uneasily on his seat and wiping his tears away with the back of his hand, murmured in the silence of the night:

"Help me, O Christ. Come to my aid!"

## CHAPTER II

THE clerical party had been defeated at the polls, and the new party—the excommunicated—had replaced them on the Town Council. Since that time Spatolino had felt as if he were living in an enemy's camp. The other workmen, following one after another like so many sheep, had all gone over to the new leaders and now formed a gang, who swaggered about as if they owned the place.

With the help of the handful of workmen who had remained faithful in their allegiance to the Church, Spatolino had founded "the Catholic Mutual Benefit Society of Unworthy Sons of the *Madonna Addolorata*." But this attempt at organisation did not prevent the struggle from being a very uneven one. His enemies (and some of his friends as well) laughed at him. The knowledge of his helplessness had sent Spatolino into paroxysms of rage which had nearly driven him mad.

As president of the Catholic Benefit Society he had insisted on arranging processions, illuminations and fireworks for the feasts of St. Michael the Archangel and St. Francesco di Paola, for Good Friday and Corpus Christi—in a word for all the principal feast days in the calendar. The former Municipal Committee had favoured the observance of these public holidays and had helped in the cost, but the anti-clerical party now in power greeted the festivities with hoots and hisses and laughed at him for spending his money on them. As a result of this expenditure, the small capital which had enabled him to become a contractor had shrunk so much that he could now see that the day was not far distant when he would again be reduced to the miserable status of a builder's day-labourer.

For some time past, Spatolino's wife had shewn him no respect or consideration. She had started providing for her own needs and those of the children, doing laundry or sewing or any other domestic work she could find.

Did she think that he was out of work on purpose? How could he get work if those dogs kept all the contracts among themselves? What did his wife want? That he should renounce his faith, deny God and go and enter his name in their party list? He'd have his hands cut off sooner than do a thing like that!

Meanwhile his enforced idleness was ruining his morale, making him daily more touchy and bitter, and poisoning his mind against everyone.

Ciancarella, the lawyer, had never joined any political party, but he was notoriously hostile to religion. He professed his hostility openly—it was the only profession he had, since he had given up practising the law. On one occasion he had even dared to set his dogs at a priest—Don Lagaipa, a holy man who had called at his house to intercede on behalf of some poor relations of Ciancarella's who were literally starving to death, whilst the rich man was living like a lord in the magnificent villa he had built just outside the little town. God only knows by what dirty tricks he had piled up so much money. Certainly he had added to it for many years by usury.

Fortunately it was summer and Spatolino was able to spend the whole night out of doors. Part of the time he sat and the rest he spent in wandering restlessly up and down the deserted lane. All the time he pondered *fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi . . .* over that mysterious invitation from Ciancarella.

He knew that the lawyer was an early riser; so when at daybreak, he heard his wife get up and begin her housework, he thought it best to start on his way. He left the chair outside in the road

way: it was old and broken and no one would steal it.

## CHAPTER III

CIANCARELLA'S villa was surrounded by a high wall like a fortress. An iron gate in the wall opened on to the provincial highway. The owner was far from prepossessing in appearance: he looked like a hideous great toad dressed up in clothes and boots. An enormous cyst on his neck made him hold his shaven head always bent downwards and a little on one side.

The old man lived alone in his mansion save for the presence of a single man-servant. But he had many farm-hands at his beck and call and they had weapons to protect him if necessary. Also he kept two huge mastiffs the very sight of which was enough to frighten an intruder.

Spatolino rang the bell and instantly the ugly brutes sprang furiously at the bars of the gate. The man-servant appeared a moment later and tried to induce Spatolino to enter, but as the dogs would not quieten down, the invitation was declined. The lawyer was taking his breakfast in an ivy-clad summer-house which stood on one side of the villa,

in the middle of the garden. He had to whistle for the dogs before they would leave the gate.

"Ah! There you are, Spatolino. Good!" said Ciancarella. "Take a seat."

He pointed to one of the iron garden-seats arranged in a circle round the inside of the summer-house.

Spatolino, however, remained standing, twisting in his hands his shabby old hat all crusted with plaster.

"You're one of the Unworthy Sons, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, one of the Unworthy Sons of the *Madonna Addolorata*, and I'm proud of it. What are your Honour's wishes?"

"Just this . . ." said Ciancarella; but, instead of going on to explain, he lifted his cup to his lips and took three lingering sips of coffee. "A shrine . . ." he began and took another sip.

"What's that you say?"

"I want you to erect a shrine for me." And he fell to sipping again.

"A *shrine*, your Honour?"

"Yes, over there, on the high-road, facing my gate." After a final sip, he replaced his cup on the table and stood up, without wiping his lips. A drop of coffee trickled down from the corner of his mouth among the stubbly bristles on his chin

which had not been shaven for some time. "A shrine I said, and it mustn't be too small, because it's got to have room for a life-sized statue of Christ standing before Pilate. On the side-walls I want to put up two fine pictures, large ones—on one side the Calvary and on the other the Descent from the Cross. In fact, it's got to be quite a spacious little room inside, on a plinth three feet high, with an iron railing in front, and a crucifix on top, of course. Do you understand?"

Spatolino nodded several times with his eyes closed. Then he opened them again, sighed deeply and said:

"Your Honour's joking, of course?"

"Joking? What d'you mean?"

"I think that your Honour is joking, if you'll excuse me for saying so. Your Honour talking of erecting a shrine. . . . To the *Ecce Homo*?"

Ciancarella tried to raise his shaven head, helping it up with one hand. He laughed, in a peculiar way he had. It sounded as if he were crying, in pain from the swelling on his neck.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "In your opinion, I'm not worthy to put up a shrine?"

"No, sir, you're not," Spatolino hastened to assert. He was growing heated in his indignation. "Why should your Honour commit a sacrilege like that, without any justification? Excuse my

speaking plainly, but who are you trying to take in? You can't take God in. He sees everything and He won't be taken in by your Honour. Is it men you are trying to deceive? They can see things too and they know that your Honour——"

"What do they know, you idiot?" interrupted the old man, with a shout. "And what do you know about God, you worm? Just what the priests have told you. Good heavens, the conceit of the fellow! . . . Oh well, I mustn't start arguing with you. . . . Look here! Have you had breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"It's a stupid habit, my good man, to start the day without a meal. May I offer you some?"

"No, thank you, sir. I don't take any."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ciancarella with a yawn. "Ah! It's the priests, my son, it's the priests who have upset your brain. They go about saying that I disbelieve in God, don't they? D'you know why they say that? Because I don't give them anything to eat. Well, you needn't worry—they'll have plenty when we consecrate our shrine. I'm going to have a splendid ceremony for the occasion. . . . Why d'you look at me like that, Spatolino? You don't believe me, perhaps? Or do you want to know how the idea came into my head? Then I'll tell you. It was in a dream, my son. I had a dream the other night. The priests will say now that God

has touched my heart. Well, let them say it—I don't care. . . . Now then, is it all settled between us? Tell me what you think. Speak up. Don't stand there looking like an owl."

"Very well, sir," agreed Spatolino with a gesture of acquiescence.

This time Ciancarella raised his head with both his hands, so that he could indulge in a long laugh.

"That's all right, then!" he said at last, when his laughter had subsided. "Now you know my way of doing business. I don't want to be bothered with anything. I know that you're a fine craftsman and that you'll turn me out a decent little shrine and treat me honestly. You do the whole thing on your own and arrange all the outlay without bothering me with it, and when you've finished, let me have your bill and I'll settle it. . . . Now, as regards the shrine, do you understand how I want it built?"

"Yes, your Honour."

"When will you start on the work?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it can start to-morrow."

"And when will you be able to finish it?"

Spatolino remained in thought for some moments, then said: "Well, if it's to be the size you've mentioned, I'll take . . . I should say . . . about a month."

"Very well. Let's go and have a look at the site now."

Though Ciancarella owned the land on the other side of the highway, he had left it uncultivated, in a state of complete neglect. He had only bought it to prevent any buildings from being erected in front of his villa. He allowed the shepherds to take their flocks to graze there, just as if it were communal waste land. To erect a shrine there no one's permission would be necessary. When the site had been agreed upon, just opposite the entrance gate, the old man returned to his villa, leaving Spatolino alone.

"*Fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi . . .*" he began, and could not stop, so deep was his perturbation. He started walking and finally found that his feet had carried him, almost involuntarily, to the house of Don Lagaipa, who was his confessor. It was only after he had knocked at the door that he remembered that the priest had been ill in bed for some days past, and that he ought not to have disturbed him with an early morning call. However, the matter was urgent, so he went in.

## CHAPTER IV

DON LAGAIPA was no longer in bed but was standing in the middle of the room, dressed in his shirt and trousers. He was busy cleaning the barrels of a gun, while his women-folk—the maid, servant and his niece—fussed round, trying to carry out the numerous orders he was giving them.

An attack of smallpox in early life had apparently caused his enormous fleshy nose to expand still further and had left it deeply pitted, giving it the look of a sponge. The priest's face was sallow and unhealthy, and his shining dark eyes squinted outwards, as if they wanted to get away from that monstrous nose.

"They're ruining me, Spatolino, ruining me," he cried. "A few days ago my man came to tell me that my farm has become communal property—the silly fool! It's everybody's property now, he says. That's what the socialists have done. They're taking my grapes while they're still green, stealing my cactus-fruit—everything. 'What's yours is mine,' they say. What's yours is mine, indeed! I'm sending him this gun—see! 'Shoot at their legs,' I told him. What they need to cure them is a dose of lead—Rosina, you booby, I told you I

wanted some more vinegar and a clean rag. . . . Well, my son, what is it you wish to say to me?"

Spatolino found much difficulty in relating his story. As soon as he mentioned Ciancarella's name the priest broke into a torrent of abuse. When he came to the order to build a wayside shrine, he saw Don Lagaipa's face fill with amazement.

"A *shrine!*"

"Yes, reverend Father. To the *Ecce Homo*. I've come to ask your advice whether I ought to build one for him."

"What's the good of asking me that? What did you reply to him, you fool?"

Spatolino repeated all that he had said to Ciancarella, adding a good many things that he had not said—sentences loud in praise of the merits of the belligerent priest.

"Excellent! Well, what did he say—the son of a bitch?"

"He told me he'd had a dream."

"The rogue! Don't you believe him. He's a rogue. If God had really spoken to him in a dream, the first thing He would have suggested to him would be to give some help to the Lattuga family—his own relatives, who are really starving. You know that he refuses to treat them as relations simply because they are godly people and loyal to us, whilst he lavishes his protection on the Montoro

family—those accursed atheists and socialists—and he's sure to leave all his money to them. Well, that's enough. What do you want from me? Permission to build the shrine? Yes, you may as well build it. If you don't take the order for it, someone else will. Anyway, as far as we are concerned, it's always something to the good that a great sinner like that should shew some desire to reconcile himself with God. But he's a rogue if ever there was one."

Spatolino went back to his house and spent the whole day drawing plans of shrines. When evening came he went out to arrange for the necessary building materials and to engage a couple of labourers and a boy to mix the mortar. Next day at dawn he started on the work.

## CHAPTER V

PEOPLE passing on foot or horseback or with their carts along the dusty highroad stopped to ask Spatolino what he was building.

"A shrine."

"Who gave you the order for it?"

Raising his forefinger to heaven, he answered in a gloomy tone:

"The *Ecce Homo*."

That was the only answer he gave to the repeated inquiries during all the time the work lasted. People laughed and shrugged their shoulders.

"Why did you choose this site for it?" one of the passers-by asked, with a meaning glance at the entrance-gate of the villa.

It never entered anyone's mind that the lawyer himself might have given the order for the shrine. None of them even knew that that plot of land belonged to Ciancarella. They knew, however, that Spatolino was a religious fanatic, and they all thought that he had succeeded in obtaining a grant from the bishop or had got the Catholic Society to vote the funds, and had chosen that site for the shrine in order to annoy the old usurer. They regarded it as a splendid joke.

Meanwhile, it seemed as if God was displeased with the work, for poor Spatolino suffered one misfortune after another. It took as much as four days' excavation before they reached solid soil for the foundation. Then there were disputes at the quarry over the stone, and further disputes, over the lime, with the workmen at the kiln; and finally, when the mould for the arch was being set up, it collapsed, and it was only by a miracle that the boy escaped from serious injury. There was one last blow—a fatal one. On the very day on which Spatolino

was going to shew him the shrine, completely finished, Ciancarella was struck down by apoplexy. There was no doubt that it was a genuine stroke, for three hours later he was dead.

Nothing could shake the conviction in Spatolino's mind that the lawyer's sudden death was a punishment from a wrathful deity. He did not, however, at first believe that the wrath of God would also fall upon him, because he had given his services for the erection of the accursed building—very unwillingly, it is true. But he believed it when he went to the Montoro family, who had inherited the estate, and asked them to pay him for the work; for they replied that they had no knowledge at all of any shrine having been ordered and therefore refused to admit liability for a claim for which he had no documentary proof.

"What?" exclaimed Spatolino. "For whom do you think I built the shrine?"

"For the *Ecce Homo*," they replied.

"But do you think I put it up on my own account?"

"Of course you did," they answered, anxious to get rid of the man. "We feel that we should be lacking in respect to the memory of our dear uncle if we entertained for one moment the supposition that he could have given you an order for a shrine. Such a proceeding would have been entirely con-

trary to his way of thinking and feeling. The notion is utterly absurd. It's no good your asking us to pay. You can keep your rotten shrine. If you don't like it, you'll have to go to law about it."

Go to law—why not? thought Spatolino, and immediately filed a suit against them. How could he possibly lose his case? Could the court seriously believe that he had built the shrine at his own expense? Hadn't he got the servant for a witness, Ciancarella's own servant, who had come to call him to the villa under his master's orders? And there was also Don Lagaipa to whom he had gone for advice that very day; his wife too, to whom he had related the whole affair, and the two masons who had worked with him all that time. How could he possibly lose his case?

He did lose it, however—his claim was rejected outright. Ciancarella's man, on whose evidence he had relied, had now entered the service of the Montoro family and came to give evidence in their favour, stating that he had, it was true, gone under his dear master's orders to summon Spatolino to the villa, but not because his master, poor dear gentleman, had any idea of giving him a contract to build a shrine on the roadside there. No, it was because his master had heard from the gardener—a man who was now dead—an unfortunate

coincidence!) that Spatolino intended to put up a shrine on that spot of his own will, just opposite the entrance-gate, and the master wanted to warn the builder that the plot of ground, just across the road, was *his* property and that he must take good care not to put up "*any humbugging erection*" of that kind on his site. He added that one day he had told his dear master that, despite the prohibition, Spatolino was digging there with three workmen under him, and that his master, poor dear gentleman, had replied: "Oh! let him dig. Don't you know that the wretched man is out of his mind? Perhaps he's looking for buried treasure to finish Saint Catherine's Church with."

Don Lagaipa's evidence carried no weight, since it was notorious that he had induced Spatolino on many occasions to behave foolishly in the matter of processions and so forth. The remaining witnesses were the three workmen who admitted in court that they had never seen Ciancarella and that their daily wages had always been paid them by the builder himself.

Spatolino rushed from the court-room in a state bordering on lunacy. It was not so much the fact that he had lost his small remaining capital, all swallowed up by the expense of building the shrine; nor was it the fact that, in addition, he had been condemned to pay the costs of the suit. It

was the complete collapse of his belief in divine justice that drove him mad.

"Is there no God?" he cried. "Can it be that there is no God in heaven?"

Under the influence of Don Lagaipa, he filed an appeal. Its rejection was the final blow. When the news arrived that the Court of Appeal had also disallowed his claim, he remained for a time stupefied, unable to utter a word. Then he suddenly rushed out of the house and spent the last coppers he had in his pocket on the purchase of a yard and a half of red cotton cloth and three old sacks.

Returning home he threw the sacks into his wife's lap and curtly ordered her: "Make them into a robe for me!"

His wife stared at him, uncomprehending.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I've told you. Make me a robe. . . . You won't? . . . Well, I'll make one myself."

In less time than it takes to describe it, he cut open the bottoms of two of the sacks and sewed them together lengthwise. In the upper one he made a slit down the front and two holes at the sides. Out of the third sack he made the sleeves and sewed them on to the holes. Finally he stitched up the top of the upper sack for a few inches on either side so as to leave an opening only

just wide enough for his neck. He rolled the garment into a bundle, picked up his red cotton cloth and went out without saying good-bye to anyone.

An hour or two later the news spread through the town that Spatolino had gone out of his mind. He had taken up his station in the new shrine on the high-road just opposite Ciancarella's villa, and was posing there as a statue of Christ standing before Pilate.

"Posing there as a statue? What d'you mean?"

"Yes, he's posing as Christ, inside the shrine."

"Is it possible? You don't mean it!"

"Yes, it's perfectly true. Come and look!"

The people all hurried to the spot and found him standing inside the shrine, behind its railing. He was dressed in his gown of sack-cloth. The sacks still had printed on them the trademark of the druggist's firm from which they came. The red cotton cloth was thrown across his shoulders like a cloak. He had a crown of thorns on his head and a stick in his hand.

His head was bent and his eyes were fixed on the ground. He did not seem in the least upset by the laughs or hisses of the crowd whose jeers grew more and more uproarious. Small boys pelted him with orange-peel, and other spectators openly addressed him in the most insulting terms, but he remained absolutely motionless throughout the up-

roar—to all appearance a real statue, save that his eyelids flickered from time to time.

His wife came, with the other women of the quarter. She began by imploring him to desist and ended by heaping curses on him. Both were in vain, as were the entreaties of his tearful children. The hubbub continued until a couple of policemen came upon the scene, broke open the iron gate and took Spatolino away under arrest.

"Let me alone! Who is more of a Christ than I am?" he screamed, struggling to escape from their hold. "Can't you see how they are mocking me and insulting me? Who is more of a Christ than I am? Leave me alone. This is my house. I built it myself, with my own money and my own hands. I've poured my blood into it. Leave me alone, you Jews!"

The "Jews," however, would not let him go—not until nightfall. Then the police-sergeant sent for him and said: "You be off home now. Home, d'you hear? And be careful what you do!"

"Yes, Pilate," answered Spatolino with a low bow.

He did not go home, however, but returned quite unobtrusively to his shrine. Once inside, he reclothed himself as Christ and spent the night there. Nor did he ever move from the place again.

## THE WAYSIDE SHRINE

They tried to drive him away by starvation, by intimidation and mockery, but all was in vain. Finally they left him undisturbed—a poor lunatic who did no one any harm.

. . . . .

People soon began to bring him little gifts—food or drink, or oil for the lamp which was always burning. After a time some of the ignorant women began to speak of him as a holy man; they would go and beg him to pray for them and their families; one of them took him a new gown, less rough than his old sack. In return for the gift, she prayed him to tell her what three numbers to apply for at the next lottery.

Carters passing at night along the highway, looked out from a distance for the gleam of his little lamp and were pleased when they caught sight of it. They would stop for a time in front of the shrine to chat with the poor Christ, who smiled amiably back at their banter. Then they set off again on their journeys. The noise of their carts gradually died away into silence and the poor Christ settled down to sleep again.

Now and then at night, a cricket, attracted by his light, flew suddenly in upon him and awakened him with a start. Then he resumed his prayers, but often whilst he was engaged in prayer, another

cricket—the humming cricket of former days—would wake up within him. Spatolino then removed from his forehead the crown of thorns, to which he had grown accustomed, and rubbed the sore places where they had left their marks: his eyes wandered, vague and unseeing, round his little shrine as he started gently whistling:

*"Fififi . . . fififi . . . fififi."*

# THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE



## THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

TWICE Dorotèa's mother had looked in from the doorway to tell her little daughter that she mustn't talk such a lot or get so excited, because her fever would become worse.

"You're talking all the time. . . . *You* are doing all the playing. . . ."

Dorotèa was sitting up in her little bed, propped against a pile of pillows. All her lovely dolls were arranged around her. In the heat of the game, her yellow hair had come tumbling out from under her blue silk cap. She shook the ends back from her eyes and replied:

"No, Mummy, I'm not doing all the playing. Nenè's playing too."

Nenè was the nurse's little daughter.

But up to that moment, if the truth must be told, Nenè had not uttered a single word. Each time, she had stared, almost in a panic, at the lady who put her head round the door. The squeak of the handle, the creaking of the door as it opened, the sight of Dorotèa's mother and the sound of her voice had brought tumbling down with a crash the dream-world in which Nenè had spent the past two

hours. All that time she had been in fairyland, haunted, however, by the fear that all that she saw and all that she could touch, were not real at all.

The child was dressed in an ill-made frock of a pea-green colour, which she had had for the past two years and which now pinched her at the neck and under the arms and was too tight across the shoulders. A rather faded pink silk ribbon tied round her head was gradually loosening under the resistance of the thick mass of coarse black hair, which was still quite damp, for she had given herself an extra thorough wash that day. When she first found herself in the nursery, with its padded walls hung with blue silk, she seemed in a dream, dazzled by the luxury all round her so that at first she could neither see nor hear. Gently, unconscious of what she was doing, she stretched out her rough hand, swollen by the pressure of her short sleeve, which gripped her arm as tightly as the skin of a sausage closes on its contents. She fingered the smooth soft texture of the coverlet, opened her mouth and listened wide-eyed to the unceasing flow of prattle from the little mistress.

Dorotèa saw clearly that it was really Nenè who was playing with the dolls although she had not so far spoken a word. It was Nenè's silent wonder and the way she gazed intently at the seven dolls sitting in a circle like so many ladies paying an afternoon

call—that was what breathed a new life into the dolls and made Dorotèa once more find pleasure in making them move and speak. For a long time now, those seven dolls had really seemed to their owner to possess hardly any life at all—just bits of wood, heads of wax or china, eyes of glass and hair of tow. But to-day they had souls once again; they had come to life in a way which she could never have imagined possible. She felt quite surprised that they could be such real people, and all owing to Nenè's wonder, to the admiration of a little girl whose mother was only a servant. To impress her listener, she made the dolls talk like great ladies full of whims and affectations, very like the way in which her mother's friends spoke.

"You see that one there. She's Countess Lulu. She drives her own car and smokes gold-tipped cigarettes and she's always holding up her finger, like this, as she says: 'Moringhi, Moringhi, if you run away, I'll run away too and join you!'"

Who was Moringhi? Nenè couldn't say. Perhaps a magician—or perhaps he was some friend of Dorotèa's mother, a friend of all her circle of lady-friends. But every time she heard Countess Lulu's exclamation, Nenè pictured Moringhi as some kind of magician, for Dorotèa had told her that he was a special friend of that doll over there, called Mistress Betty.

“ ‘*All right, thank you!*’ ”

“ No, no, you mustn’t laugh at that, Nenè. Mistress Betty always talks in English—to my mother and to everyone. She always goes about on horseback—clop! clop! clop!—but she sits her horse in an ugly way, with her legs wide apart, like that . . . like men ride . . . it’s ugly for ladies to ride that way. She often falls off her horse and once, when she was riding after some wolves, she was wounded in the cheek. Look, there’s the scar! D’you see the place? And it serves her right, too—the horrid American woman! She used to shew everyone the marks she got from her falls—on her chest and back, and even on her legs—and when she shook hands with you she hurt you.

“ ‘*All right, thank you!*’ ”

“ And that other doll over there? Oh, she’s terribly funny—she makes you simply die of laughing. She’s Donna Mariu. You should hear the way she talks. ‘Oh, goodness gracious! . . . My poor head! Remember I’ve got a weak heart. Moringhi, please be serious. You’re upsetting me, Moringhi . . . I can’t stand any more laughing. My poor head. Remember I’ve got a weak heart. And she speaks so funnily, she doesn’t say ‘laughing’ but ‘laffing.’ That’s how Moringhi says it. Oh, she’s terribly funny!’ ”

Nenè was hopelessly bewildered.

She wondered if it could really be true that one of the dolls smoked cigarettes and another went out riding—there certainly was that scar on her cheek, all right. . . . For if those dolls wore drawers bordered with lace and with little bows of ribbon on them, and even had silk stockings with velvet garters and patent leather shoes with gold buckles, it might really be true that they rode on horseback and smoked and talked that language she couldn't understand a word of. Anything, however marvellous, might turn out to be real in that room—she half expected that at any minute, horses—live horses, tiny little live horses—might suddenly appear and start galloping round on the wide plains of that velvety carpet, with the dolls sitting on their backs, with their filmy veils fluttering behind them.

Fascinated by the visions she saw, Nenè found it hard to believe her ears, or somehow did not grasp what Dorotèa was saying to her. For that young lady, tired at last of her game, had decided to give her one of the dolls as a present, but had not yet decided which one it was to be.

"No, not that one," said Dorotèa. "She's got a bad arm and ought to stay in bed with me. Look here, I'll give you . . . I'll give you Mistress Betty. . . . No, no, I can't give her either. She'd run away from you. . . . She's such a naughty doll—Mistress Betty—and so rude. And then she always

speaks English, you see, and you wouldn't understand her. So I'll give you this other one. Her name is Mimi, but *you* must call her 'My Lady' because she's a Marchioness. You understand what that is, don't you? Well, she's the Marchioness Mimi and she's very particular . . . oh, very particular indeed. She has to have her bath ready punctually every morning, and for breakfast she wants chocolate and biscuits and . . . and then, you know . . . she's got a poor appetite and eats nothing except those little sweets covered with silver—the kind that Mother buys at Baker's—you know, that chemist's shop opposite the Grand Hotel. Yes, I'll give you Mimi. Here you are—take her. I really am giving her to you for keeps—you understand? You can have her, I tell you. . . . Wait a minute, while I give her a kiss. There she is. Now you can take her away with you."

Nenè was covered with confusion. She was too taken aback to feel any pleasure—anything but distress. She had risen to her feet when Dorotèa pressed the gift upon her, but she stood still, unable to hold out her hand for it, on the point of bursting into tears.

At that moment the lady of the house entered the room, followed by the nurse—Nenè's mother, who had originally gone to the family as a wet-nurse and had stayed on in service after the baby had

been weaned. When Nenè glanced up at her own mother and saw her standing beside the lady and looking so grand in her uniform with a nurse's head-dress and a white embroidered apron, it seemed to the child as if her mother too were transfused in the glory of that wonderful house, as if she were somehow very far away from her, shining in the blue of distant space.

What was her mother saying? She was telling Dorotèa she mustn't give her the doll! She oughtn't to give it, she said, because, in the first place it was much too fine, too well dressed, with its shoes and gloves and hat. Just fancy giving her Nenè a doll like that! And then, what would Nenè do with it? She had her work cut out, had Nenè, looking after the home. She must keep house for her father and had no time for playing. She'd be in terrible trouble if her father didn't find everything ready when he came back at night.

Her father? Where was he? He seemed to Nenè at that moment to be in another world—that horrid father of hers, who always came home drunk and grumbling, and beat her for nothing at all, and pulled her hair so dreadfully and threw things at her, anything that he could reach, shouting, “Why didn't *you* die instead?” . . .

He meant instead of her little brother. Her mother had left the baby when she had gone out as

a wet-nurse, and a neighbour had promised to suckle the child for a few lire a month, and Nenè had had to look after him. One day, however, her little brother had died in her arms, while she was holding him. She didn't know that he was dead, and continued for a time to carry him about—very cold and pale and quiet and rigid. From that time onward, her father had become a wicked, cruel man—so cruel that her mother wouldn't live with him any more, but stayed on in the mansion as a servant—or to be a “grand lady,” as her father said. And really when Nenè looked at her now, she began to think the same thing. Judging from her appearance and the way she spoke and her smiles and gestures, she had indeed become a lady, just like Dorotèa's mother. To Nenè she no longer seemed her own mother.

“No, no, Miss Dorotèa! How could you think of such a thing? It won't do at all. You mustn't dream of giving a lovely doll like that to my poor Nenè.”

But the very next moment the lady had taken hold of the child's arm, placed the doll—the Marcharioness Mimi—to her breast and then pressed the arm against it to hold it tightly there.

“Where are your manners?” cried Nenè's mother. “Not a word of thanks? Come, what do you say for that present?”

Nothing! Nenè could not find a word to say. She did not even feel bold enough to look at the doll Marchioness clasped tightly to her breast.

She went away still quite dazed, her eyes very wide open, her mouth open too and her hair bristling up under its pink ribbon despite all her mother's attempts to smooth it down. Oblivious to the sights and sounds around her, she descended the stairs and walked along the streets until at last she reached the miserable cottage in which she lived with her father. It seemed as if all her vitality had been transferred to that wonderful doll which she was hugging so tightly, as if it were living a life incomprehensible to her, a life of which she had caught dazzling glimpses during the incessant chatter of the mistress's sick daughter. Good heavens, if that doll only spoke the language which Miss Dorotèa had put into her mouth, how on earth would she be able to understand her?

"Moringhi, Moringhi, if you run away, I'll run away too and join you."

Ah, certainly Moringhi wouldn't think of coming to that wretched hovel to call on the Marchioness Mimi, nor would any of her lady friends. They had gold-tipped cigarettes and scented sweets coated with silver! And real horses, live horses, tiny little ones!

It never entered the child's head for one moment

that she could play with the doll. She could be a servant to her Marchioness—yes, she could serve her; but how was she to do that if she didn't even know how to speak to her, if she understood nothing about the life to which the doll was accustomed?

Back in the wretched little room where she slept, furnished with her pallet, a broken-bottomed cane chair and a small stool which had served as a table for her school preparation, she looked about her disconsolately, overcome by a sense of shame, not on her own account, but on that of the little lady she was carrying in her arms. She still had not ventured to look at her. To be sure, the Marchioness Mimi, whose eyes were only made of glass, could not herself see the squalor of that hole she had come to, but Nenè now noticed it, looking at it with the eyes of the Marchioness who had come there from a room in which there was such luxury. As long as she did not look at the doll, but kept her clasped under her arm, the Marchioness Mimi could see nothing, but she would be able to do so as soon as Nenè could make up her mind to look at her. So it was necessary to arrange matters in such a way that her first impression would not be as bad as it might have been.

She remembered that in a small box under her bed, in which she kept her clothes, there was a blue

apron which had been discarded by Miss Dorotèa. The mother had given it to the nurse for Nenè to wear. It had lost its colour from repeated washing and it had been torn in more places than one, but it came from the great house, it had once belonged to Dorotèa, and perhaps the Marchioness would recognise it.

Without putting the doll down or stealing a glance at her, Nenè stooped and took the apron out of the box, then spread it on the stool for a tablecloth, taking care that the torn places—at any rate the worst of them—should not come on the top of the table. There! Now she had a place where she could let the doll sit, at least for the time being; for, though very old, the apron was clean and was made of a delicate fabric.

Her hands trembled in fear of hurting the doll or crumpling her clothes, as she placed her gently in a sitting position. Then at last she ventured to look at her. She threw out her arms with a gesture of adoration mixed with pity, while her face clouded over with painful uncertainty. Sinking slowly upon her knees she gazed into the doll's eyes. Alas! the wonderful life with which Miss Dorotèa had endowed the doll, in her room, had almost died out here. The doll sitting in front of her seemed to be waiting blindly for something to be done to give life back to her, the life which she had lost—the life

of a great lady. How could it be done? What could Nenè do? Everything was lacking. Miss Dorotèa had said that her dolls were accustomed to change their clothes several times a day, and that the Marchioness Mimi had many dresses, each more beautiful than the last—one red, another yellow, another purple, one with little flowers printed on it, another with Japanese parasols. Could she now really be expected to live always in that one dress, with the same pair of shoes on her little feet, the same hat, the same bracelets and round her neck always that chain, from which her fan dangled. What a beautiful fan it was, made of real feathers: one could fan oneself with it and feel the breeze it made—just the least little draught of air, but quite enough for the small Marchioness Mimi. . . .

If only they could have been in Miss Dorotèa's house where there were all the things that were needed—the little white bed and other doll's furniture, the beautiful wardrobe of clothing—how happy Nenè would have been to act as servant to the Marchioness Mimi. But how could she serve her here? Why had it never occurred to Miss Dorotèa that she ought at the very least to have given her the little bed and a small part of the outfit of clothes. It wasn't that Nenè wanted further and more valuable presents, but that she should not have to see the doll suffer, that she should be in a

position to serve her. How could she attend to her wants, when she had nothing at all with which to supply them? The utmost she could do would be to clean the patent-leather shoes, by breathing on them and rubbing them with the tip of her finger or with the end of a handkerchief. There was absolutely nothing else she could do!

Wouldn't it be almost better to take the doll back to Miss Dorotèa and say: "Please either give me what she needs, so that she can live in the style she's accustomed to, or you keep her yourself."

And who could say? perhaps Miss Dorotèa would give her the doll's complete outfit. . . .

Nenè heaved a long-drawn sigh as she squatted in front of the stool. She looked round and with a sudden flash there came to her the vision of the Marchioness Mimi's little apartment transferred to the corner of her shabby room. The little apartment seemed quite spacious, with its soft blue carpet covering the floor, its wooden bed all in white save for the blue silk canopy, and beyond it the glass-panelled wardrobe, the gilt chairs and the large wall-mirror. She could see herself, nicely dressed like her mother, all absorbed in her duties towards her capricious, exacting little mistress. She would be attentive and alert to foresee all her wishes, so as to escape from being scolded; for certainly the Marchioness Mimi, left all alone with

her, would be dissatisfied, even though she were surrounded by every comfort, by all the luxury she was accustomed to. She would miss her visits from lady friends . . . would miss Moringhi and her morning rides. She would rule her servant with a rod of iron.

"Is my bath ready?"

"It will be ready in one moment, my lady. . . ."

"But my bath ought to be quite ready as soon as I wake up. What do you mean by making me wait? Give me my chocolate and biscuits at once. And my dress—hurry up!"

"Which one, your ladyship? The red one? Or the yellow? Or the one with Japanese parasols on it?"

"No, the purple one. Don't you know it?"

"Yes, yes, at once, my lady. See, here it is, your ladyship. . . ."

With wide eyes Nenè was gazing into the magic corner, seeing her dream come true. For some time now she had been carrying on the conversation in an audible voice, using a loud imperious tone for the Marchioness and a humble, respectful one for herself—the devoted little maid-servant who makes allowances for all the caprices of her tyrannical mistress. All of a sudden, she shuddered from head to foot, terrified at the sight of a huge, coarse hand which reached over her and grasped the doll seated on the stool.

She bent her head, overcome with confusion; then, out of the corner of her eye, she ventured to cast a glance back over her shoulder.

Her father stood behind her, his bristly lips twisted in a sneer, as he examined the fragile doll clutched in his rough hand. He shook his head and shouted:

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?”

Her soul filled with anguish as she saw him raise his other hand and seize with his thumb and finger the brim of the doll’s hat. He gave a violent pull. Nenè stifled a groan as the Marchioness Mimi’s head came off together with the hat. Then the fragments, horribly mutilated, disappeared through the little window high under the roof. The next moment Nenè felt a savage kick and heard the furious outburst:

“Get up! No more of this blasted nonsense! I’ll have no ‘grand ladies’ in my house—d’you hear? . . .”



# THE RIVERS OF LAPLAND



## THE RIVERS OF LAPLAND

A COMPASS and a helm . . . well, yes! I suppose you need them if you want to navigate. . . . But you've got to prove to me first that there's any point in navigating—I mean that it leads to any kind of result, taking one route rather than another, or casting anchor in this harbour rather than in that.

“What!” you say, “How about business? Is there no rule for business—no guiding criterion? And then one's family? And the education of one's children? And one's good repute among one's fellows? And one's obedience to the laws of the state? And one's personal duties and so on. . . .”

But d'you think that I don't attend properly to my business? As for my family—you can take my word for it—my wife hates me; but properly so—neither more nor less than your wife hates you. And as to my children, d'you mean to say that I don't bring them up properly, as you bring yours up? And, believe me, I have quite satisfactory results, not very different from what you, with all your wisdom, succeed in achieving. I obey all the

laws of the state and I pay scrupulous attention to my duties.

Only—and here is the point—I put (if I may so describe it) a certain spiritual elasticity into all these actions; I take advantage of all the ideas of positive science acquired in childhood and adolescence, while you, who learnt them just as I did, shew that either you know nothing about them or you're unwilling to profit by them.

I admit that it's not at all easy to apply those ideas which are in conflict with the illusions of our senses—the idea that the earth moves, for example. A drunkard, it is true, could utilise it as a neat excuse. But in actual fact we do not feel the earth move, save from time to time in some paltry earthquake. And as for the mountains, they look so tremendously lofty to us, that it's no easy matter, I grant you, to think of them as tiny wrinkles on the earth's surface. But, after all, I ask you—what on earth was the point in our studying so as children, if we can't remember what astronomy has taught us—the minute, almost infinitesimal place which our planet occupies in the universe. . . .

Oh yes! I know all that dreary argument of the philosophers: "The earth is small, we admit, but our soul is not small, seeing that it can conceive the infinite grandeur of the universe."

Now, who was it said that? Oh, Pascal . . . yes.

One must however remember that, on that theory, the greatness of man, if it exists, does so only on the condition that he bears in mind his own littleness, when compared with the infinite magnitude of the universe; and therefore man is only great when he feels himself very small, and is never so small as when he feels himself great!

Well, then—I ask you again—what comfort and consolation can we possibly derive from such spurious greatness? Surely the only result is that we are doomed to the hopeless position of seeing little things—all our things here, in this world—as great, and the great things—the stars in heaven, for instance, as little. Then wouldn't it be better, when some disaster overtakes us—some public or personal calamity—if we were to turn our gaze on high, and reflect that in the stars they do not even know that the earth exists. In this way, if one gets right to the heart of things, everything is of the most trivial importance.

“Very well!” you say. “But supposing, for example, that here, in this world, I should lose a son. . . .”

Yes, I admit that's a difficult example; and it will become still more difficult, I assure you, when you begin to get over the first shock and, with eyes which do not want to see, you happen to notice,

say, the gentle grace of the little blue and white flowers that appear in the meadows with the first sunny days of March. The warm spring sun casts a spell over you and you are exhilarated in spite of yourself—but suddenly this feeling is changed to an even more poignant anguish, at the thought that he alas! will never be there to feel it.

Well? What consolation—in God's name!—would you have for the death of your son? Is it not better to have none? Yes! None at all, believe me. To look upon the world as unimportant—disasters and *joie de vivre*, both equally unimportant—the absolute unimportance, in fact, which all human affairs must possess when looked at from the heavens, from Sirius, say, or from Alpha Centaurus. . . .

"It's not easy!" you tell me. Thank you! Did I say that it *was* easy? Believe me, the science of astronomy is a very difficult one—not only to study, but also to apply to the affairs of life.

For the rest, I accuse you of inconsistency. You maintain that this planet of ours is entitled to some degree of respect, that it is not, after all, so small, when compared to the feelings by which we are moved, and that it presents many fine prospects and a variety of life, climates, customs, and so forth. . . . Then you shut yourself up in a cocoon, as it were, and pay not the slightest attention to all

that life around you, but let it escape your notice, whilst you remain absorbed by some thought which obsesses you, or by a misery which lies heavy on you.

Yes, yes, I know! Now you're going to say that when one is worried, or obsessed by some passion, it is not possible to distract oneself by imagining that one's life is different, or elsewhere. But I'm not telling you to place *yourself* somewhere else in imagination, or to pretend that *you* have a life other than the one which is causing you suffering. For that's exactly what you do—you say with a sigh: "Oh! if only it weren't like this! If only I had this, or that! If only I could be there!" And the sighs are futile. For, if your life could really be different, it's impossible to say what feelings, what hopes, what desires would arise within you—quite other than those which now arise within you, from the fact that your life is as it is! You even go so far as to feel annoyed against those who are what you would like to be, or where you would like to be, or possess what you would like to possess. You feel annoyed because it seems to you that, although they live under those conditions which you envy, they don't know how to be as happy as you would be. Excuse my saying so, but it's the annoyance of a fool. For you envy those conditions precisely because they are not your own; and if

they were your own, you would no longer be *you*—that is to say, you would no longer be possessed by the same desires as now.

No, no, my dear people, my remedy is quite different. It's not easy either, but it's quite practicable—so much so that I have proved it myself by actual experiment.

. . . . .

I caught a glimpse of it one night—on one of many very wretched nights—when I had to keep vigil at a lingering, everlasting death-bed—when my poor mother lay for months and months almost, but not quite, a corpse.

To my wife, it was the mother-in-law. To my children, someone was dying whose son I was. I put it thus, because when I come to die, some one of them will keep vigil by me—I hope. You understand? On that occasion, it was my mother who was dying, and it was not their business but mine.

"What!" you say. "Their grandmother!"

Yes, it was their granny, dear granny. . . . And then also, for my part—I assure you—I deserved some consideration; I ought not to have been kept up night after night, chilled through, when I was dropping with fatigue after a very heavy day's work.

But do you know why it was? Granny's day,

dear granny's day, had been over for some time past. Like a toy that has been spoilt, dear granny had lost her charm for the grandchildren, when they saw her after her operation for cataract, with one small eye and the other monstrously big through the concave lens of her spectacles. A granny like that was no longer an attractive sight. And she had gradually become as deaf as a post; she was eighty-five and she no longer understood anything—just a heavy mass of flesh that gasped and lurched and could hardly raise itself up. It needed an adoration such as I felt for her to overcome the weariness and disgust aroused by the nursing she needed.

On seeing her, one thought her condemned to a terrible punishment, and no one knew better than I did, that my poor mother did not in the least deserve it. Nothing had been left her of what she once had been, not even her memory; she was just flesh which, for some inscrutable reason, suffered and suffered. . . .

But what it is to be desperately in need of sleep! My friends, no amount of affection counts for anything when a cruel fate compels us to overlook certain wants which *have* to be satisfied. Just try to do without sleep for a good many nights on end, after having worked all day! At the thought of my children, who had done nothing whatever

during the day and were now warm and soundly asleep, whilst I was shivering, stiff with cold in that bedroom which reeked with the stench of drugs—a wild fury would come upon me, and I felt tempted to rush to their cots and pull off the bed-clothes (not to mention the clothes from my wife's bed) to see them wake with a start in the cold, with only their nightdresses on. But knowing how dreadfully they would shiver, and realising on reflection, that I wanted to change places with them in order that they might shiver instead of me, I suddenly felt ashamed and ceased to feel vindictive towards them, but raged instead against the cruelty of fate for insisting on keeping that body alive—that stertorously breathing, quite unconscious body—for only the body was left now and that was almost unrecognisable—my mother's body. And I thought—yes, I admit it—I thought, if only, please God, she could reach the very end of this panting.

There came a time when there was a terrible silence in the room. The panting had temporarily ceased, and turning my head—I don't quite know why—I caught sight of myself in the mirror of the wardrobe, bending over my mother's bed, peeping from quite close to see whether she were dead. My face in that mirror horrified me; just as if it wished me to see it, it retained, whilst I looked at it, the

very expression with which I had been peeping intently, with almost joyful fright, at the release.

The recommencement of the gasping at that moment caused me such revulsion of feeling against myself that I hid my face, as if I had been committing a crime. I began to weep like a child—like the child I had been to that good mother, whose pity and sympathy I now needed, for all the cold and fatigue which I felt, though I had just a moment before been longing for her death. . . . Poor, dearest mother, who had lost so many nights' rest on my account, when I was ill as a little child. . . . Torn with anguish I began to pace up and down the room.

I could no longer bear to look at the things that surrounded me, for everything in the room seemed to me suddenly alive, in silent immobility—the bright edge of the cupboard . . . the brass knob of the bedstead on which I had recently rested my hand. . . . In despair I threw myself into a chair facing the desk which belonged to my youngest daughter, who still did her school preparation in her grandmother's room. I do not know how long I sat there, but I do know that, when daylight came, after an immeasurably long period of time, during which I had not the slightest feeling of fatigue or cold or despair, I found myself with my daughter's geography textbook in front of me, open at page

seventy-five, with smudges in the margin and a fine blot of blue-black ink on the "m" of Jamaica.

All that time I had been in the Island of Jamaica, where the Blue Mountains are, where, from the north, the ground rises very gradually above sea-level until it ends in gently-sloping, delectable hills, separated from one another by broad, sunny valleys—a brook in every valley and a waterfall on every hill. Under the blue transparent water I had seen the walls of the houses of Porto Reale, submerged beneath the sea in a terrible earthquake. I had seen the plantations of sugar and coffee, of Indian corn and millet, and the forests on the mountains. I had perceived and had inhaled with indescribable comfort the rich warm smell of the bedding in the big stables of the cattle-breeders—yes, really smelt it and breathed it in—yes, really seen it all—yes, really felt the sun beating down as it does on those meadows; and seen the men, women and children (looking just as they do look there) carrying baskets of coffee beans which they spread in the sun to dry. . . . All this with the exact and tangible certainty that it was *true*, in that part of the world so far away; so true that I could feel it and set it up in opposition, as a reality just as vivid as that which surrounded me in the room of my dying mother.

That's all it is, my friends—nothing more than

the *certainty of the reality of life elsewhere, far off and different*; when occasion requires, you introduce that vision to counteract the present reality which is depressing you. Just like that, purely objectively—without any connection, without even any contrast—just a thing which is because it is, and which you cannot prevent from being what it is. That, my friends, is the remedy which I recommend to you—the remedy which I discovered unexpectedly that night.

So as not to let your mind wander too much, but to train your imagination a little, to prevent yourself from becoming tired in using it, you should do as I have done—I have assigned to each of my four children and to my wife a part of the world, about which I promptly start thinking the moment they cause me any annoyance or distress.

My wife, for example, is Lapland. Supposing she wants something from me which I cannot give her. She has hardly begun asking for it, when I'm already in the Gulf of Bothnia, and I say to her as seriously as if nothing were happening:

"Umea, Lulea, Pitea, Skelleftea. . . ."

"What *are* you saying?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing—just the rivers of Lapland."

"But what have the rivers of Lapland got to do with it?"

"Nothing, my dear, they have nothing whatever to do with it. But there they are, and neither you nor I can deny that at this precise moment they're flowing into the Gulf of Bothnia. And, my dear, if you could see, as I see, the dreariness of some of the willows and the birch trees. . . . Yes, yes, I quite agree, the willows and the birches have nothing to do with it either, but there they are too, and they look exceptionally dreary surrounding the frozen lakes in the steppes. The term 'Lap' or 'Lop,' you know, is an insult: the Laps speak of themselves as Sami. Little chaps they are, my dear, and so dirty! I may tell you—yes, I quite understand, my dear, none of this is really relevant—but I think you would be interested to know that, whilst I prize you so highly, the Laps lay such small stress on conjugal fidelity that they offer their wife or daughters to the first stranger they come across. As regards myself, don't be afraid—I don't feel in the least tempted to take advantage of that, my dear. . . ."

"But what in God's name are you talking about? Are you mad? I was asking you . . ."

"Yes, my dear, you were asking me . . . I don't say you weren't. . . . But what a dreary country it is—Lapland!"

VA BENE



## VA BENE

### CHAPTER I

AT Sorrento during the night of the twelfth February, 1861, a son (Cosmo Antonio Corvara) was born to Corvara Francesco Aurelio Amidei and Florida his wife. The baby met with an unpleasant reception—a sound beating. He had entered the world without crying, nearly suffocated by the protracted delivery, so the midwife held him head downwards for some seconds and slapped him until he did cry. For on entering into this world one must cry.

Between the 13th February, 1861, and the 15th March, 1862, he had five wet-nurses. The first two were dismissed for lack of milk; the third because, when giving him a bath one morning, she plunged him into water that was nearly boiling, having forgotten to add some cold to it. The baby was severely scalded and nearly died. A kindly Providence spared his life, but took away his mother at about that time, instead. The fourth nurse let him fall out of bed, three times—no more. Once, and once only, did she tumble down

stairs when carrying the child. His injuries from these falls were comparatively trifling, the most serious of them being the fracture of the bone in his nose.

By the time he was nine years old, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei had been attacked by all the illnesses which form as it were the steps up which one climbs—helped by the doctor on one side and the chemist on the other—from tender infancy to active childhood. At the age of nine he entered the seminary, inspired by fervent religious feeling.

A few days before going there, he had carried out in all literalness one of the seven works of charity prescribed by rule: meeting a poor boy on the seashore who was stark naked, he took off his fine new suit which his father had brought him from Naples and clothed the naked child with it, returning home himself wearing nothing but his sailor cap. But alas! the only result of his pious act was that his father called him an imbecile, an ass and a half-wit, and pulled his ears so savagely that it was a wonder that he did not pull them clean off.

At the seminary, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei devoted himself to his studies and his religious exercises with the utmost zeal—so much so, in fact, that at sixteen he was threatened with

an attack of consumption. He had already taken the first of the holy orders when he happened one day to come across the following passage in the treatise *De Gratia*:

*"Si quis dixerit gratiam perseverantiae non esse gratis datam, anathema sit."*

Roman Catholic theology—I may explain—requires one to accept the doctrine that perseverance in good works is a grace which God grants to those whom He wishes to save, irrespective of the merits or demerits of the person concerned.

*Deus libere movet*, as St. Thomas said.

Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei pondered deeply over the question for several weeks. At the end of that period he was discovered one night, candle in hand, wandering about the dormitory in only his shirt. His face was flushed and feverish, his eyes very wide open and glittering strangely. He explained that he was looking for a key. When asked what key, he said that it was the key of perseverance. He was quite mad. Fortunately an attack of brain fever ensued. He was removed from the seminary and remained for a month in danger of his life.

When at last he recovered, he had lost his faith. Nor was that all. He had lost also his hair, his power of speech, part of his sight and a good deal else besides. His memory had completely gone

and, for about a year, he remained in a kind of stupor. He was at last restored to health by a course of spinal douching and, when he was a little over twenty-two, he was able to appear for his Matriculation and go to the Naples University to study for a Doctorate in letters and philosophy. He was practically bald and half-blind and his fall during infancy had left him broken-nosed.

In October 1887 he competed for and obtained the post of Assistant Master at the Lower Secondary School at Sassari. Boys are lively young animals and if their master is ill-favoured and short-sighted, the classroom naturally becomes a bear-garden; so the Headmaster was incessantly finding fault with his assistant for his failure to keep order.

In the streets of Sassari, too, Professor Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei was teased by all the urchins, until one of his colleagues—Dolfo Dolfi, the professor of Natural Science—took it upon himself to protect him, both in school and outside. He went further than that, for he invited him to share his lodgings with him.

Dolfo Dolfi had entered the teaching profession when already an elderly man. He possessed no academic qualifications, and had secured his appointment without the usual examination, thanks to the kind offices of a very influential Member of Parliament. Previous to this he had been first an

explorer in Africa and then for many years a journalist in Genoa. He had fought upwards of a dozen duels, in most of which he had come off best. He was a free-thinker, and lived with his illegitimate daughter, to whom he had given the magnificent name of Satanina.

Under the ægis of Dolfo Dolfi, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei had hoped to breathe in peace, but in vain—for his protector did not give him the opportunity, taking up all his leisure time by accounts of his travels, of his exploits as a journalist, and his duels. He loved to relate his endless adventures, to discuss philosophy, religion, etc., the discussion consisting in a long monologue. He would tell lewd tales by the hour, sitting there with his legs wide apart and his chest puffed out, while his fingers twirled at the tufts of hair that sprouted from the numerous moles on his face. The taller his stories became, the more Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei shrank into himself, always expressing approval, never a word of contradiction. Amidei was well protected now, without a shadow of doubt, and left in peace both by his pupils and by the street urchins, for fear of what Dolfi might do. But on the other hand he was no longer his own master, allowed no freedom in the disposal of his leisure hours or even of the miserable pay he received as a teacher in the Lower Secondary

## THE NAKED TRUTH

School. If he absolutely must have a few coppers, he had to apply to Satanina for them. The girl—she was now fifteen—acted as mother to the establishment; she would give him the money with an air of great secrecy, cautioning him, whatever he did, not to let “daddy” know, or he would also be wanting money and there would be no making both ends meet.

She was a nice girl, Satanina—so nice that Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei wanted to shorten her name to the attractive form of Nina or Ninetta, but Dolfo Dolfi would not hear of it.

“Nina, Ninetta, indeed! What nonsense! Her name is Satan, I tell you—simply Satan!

“Salute, O Satana,  
O Ribellione  
O Forza Vindice  
Della Ragione.”\*

So things continued for the next three years. Professor Corvara Amidei was often asked how he could possibly manage to get on with a blustering fellow like Dolfo Dolfi; but he never said a word in reply: shrugging his shoulders and half-closing his short-sighted eyes, he would throw open his

\* Hail, O Satan!  
Hail, Rebellion  
And avenging power of  
Reason!

hands with a gesture of resignation, while the faintest approach to a smile gave a pathetic appearance to his face. He quite understood that the question was meant to bring home to him the fact that people took him for an imbecile.

And indeed, if pressed, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei might well have been prepared to admit that he was an imbecile. He was not, however, quite convinced on the point, because after long reflection he had come to the conclusion that life in general was perhaps even more imbecile than he himself was. Hence it really was not worth while being very wide-awake or sharp-witted, or pretending to be—especially when life showed a fixed determination to sink its claws into one. In such a case the best course was to let life do its worst, and to put up no opposition; for, after all, life had some end in view (though we might not see it), and anyhow it would come to an end some day—there could be no dispute as to that.

It did, in fact, come to an end—quite unexpectedly—but not, alas! for him. It was Dolfo Dolfi who was suddenly taken, struck down in his classroom by an attack of apoplexy.

Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei received a great shock from this unexpected blow. To him the house had all at once become empty—mysteriously empty; for none of the objects in it possessed

any intimate memories for him, any vestige of a soul. All its contents seemed to be waiting there, sadly, for the man who could never return to them.

Satanina wept disconsolately. At first he did not even attempt to console her, thinking that no word he could say would be of any use. Then the Headmaster and his colleagues asked him what arrangement he proposed to make as regards that poor girl, left suddenly orphaned and not entitled to a pension. She was entirely unprovided for, and possessed no relations, not even distant ones. The professor promptly replied that he would keep her with him—needless to say—and be a good father to her, but the Headmaster and his colleagues shrugged their shoulders with looks of disapproval, and he went away feeling that he had said the wrong thing. He was surprised at their dissatisfaction. What was wrong with his proposal? He talked to Satanina on the matter and was amazed to find that she too considered it impossible, that she could not remain under the same roof with him, but must go away promptly, at the earliest possible moment.

“Where to?”

“Oh—anywhere. . . .”

“But why must you go?” he asked, and received no answer.

His fellow-masters explained the reason to him shortly afterwards: they pointed out that he was only a little over thirty, while Satanina was already eighteen; so he was not old enough to be her father, not was she young enough to remain on as his daughter. That was plain, wasn't it? Professor Corvara Amidei looked at the toes of his shoes, then at the tips of his fingers and tried to swallow a lump that had risen in his throat. Could his colleagues mean that he ought to . . . to . . . *marry* Satanina? At the mere suggestion he felt quite faint. No, surely they were only joking? He must talk matters over again with Satanina. He did so and tried to convince her that the idea of her going away "anywhere," as she put it, was lunacy, sheer lunacy. Then Satanina too gave him to understand that there was only one condition possible, if she was to stay on living with him. It was—Good God!—that she become his wife.

Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei was terrified by the idea that he had begun to lose his reason—either that was what had happened, or they were all in league to perpetrate a cruel jest at his expense. He was quite unable to understand how the young girl could seriously consider it necessary to become his wife—as if their living under the same roof would really give rise to scandal in the village! Could it be possible that marriage with him didn't

seem to her grotesque and in every way repellent? He went to his mirror to study his looks, and judged himself even more ugly than he really was: his face was a sickly yellow colour, owing to persistent ill-health and misfortune, and he was bald and half blind. At the thought of Satanina, so bright and healthy, his head went round. She would marry him! Could it be possible? He went back to her and stammering, asked whether she really meant to accept him. To his stupefaction Satanina answered "Yes" without any hesitation or blushing, and even went so far as to say that if he was prepared to take her, she would be eternally grateful to him.

Holding up his hand in protest, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei began to sob like a small child. He implored her not to talk of gratitude. How absurd! It was he who should be grateful. To think that fate had such bliss in store for him. It seemed incredible. . . .

For several days the professor remained quite inarticulate.

The wedding had to take place early, since the engaged couple were meanwhile compelled to live in the same house. Also the Headmaster hoped that, once married, his assistant would no longer remain in the state of blissful abstraction into which he had fallen. This hope, however, proved vain.

The ceremony was performed on March 14th, 1892, and was a purely civil function, as it was impossible for the professor to be married in a church, on account of the ecclesiastical vows which he had taken several years previously.

After his marriage, the professor became happier than ever and, as a result, even more stupid. What years of unhappiness had been unable to effect was instantly brought about by joy: Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei forgot all that he had ever learnt, even the Latin grammar, and became utterly incompetent. He had no eyes save for Satanina, no dreams save of Satanina. He would not even bother to eat, if Satanina did not insist upon his doing so. He would have been quite satisfied with the sight of his bride seated at table, gay and hungry. He would have let her have his own wretched body to feed on, if she thought it good enough for her pretty little teeth.

Meanwhile, as Dolfo Dolfi was no longer there to impose awe on the schoolboys and street urchins, the pandemonium which broke out, in the classroom and outside, was worse than ever it had been. The Headmaster stormed, reprimanding his assistant in the strongest terms, but it was entirely in vain—Professor Corvara Amidei merely smiled amiably at him, just as if the censure had no concern with himself. Satanina felt compelled to

write a letter to the Member of Parliament who had been such a good friend and patron to her father. She begged him to use his influence, which was even more powerful than before, to have the professor taken away at once from the school and appointed to some quieter post, either in a Public Library or on the staff of the Ministry of Public Instruction. Accordingly, two months later, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei left for Rome, under orders to report at the Ministry. His pupils, who, after all, were very fond of him, were greatly distressed at his departure. The Headmaster, however, and his colleagues, were extremely glad to be rid of him. Satanina, by now an expectant mother, was very ill during the sea crossing; but no sooner had they disembarked at Civitavecchia than she forgot her sufferings, such was the tonic effect of the thought that she was once again setting foot on the Italian mainland, with Rome close at hand. She was surprised to feel that the blood of her adventurous father coursed wildly through her veins.

At the Ministry of Public Instruction, the professor was relegated to the Copying Department and appointed to control the work there—but his control was utterly useless. The low-grade clerks, taken on by the day, soon saw the kind of man they had to deal with. Had their supervisor been

some elderly rascal with a fine reputation, it would have been quite another matter—plenty of bowing and scraping. But what was the use of showing respect to a poor gentleman of that type? Not that they harassed him seriously—just a few harmless jokes when work was slack. And if they made mistakes in copying—well, the blame would clearly fall on Professor Corvara Amidei.

“Would you be so good as to show me your copies, gentlemen. Attention! Please pay attention. You there, when you write *ragione*,\* spell it with one ‘g,’ please, if you will be so good.”

“Better have plenty, professor, better have two of them, since it’s a matter of reason.”

“*E va bene!*”† replied the professor with a sigh, stretching out his neck and hunching his shoulders, while he half-closed his short-sighted eyes, which were almost concealed behind the enormous lenses of his spectacles—lenses as thick as the bottom of a bottle.

Whenever the copyists heard him sigh like that and say, “*E va bene!*” they would all burst out laughing. He never understood exactly why they did so. He had a habit of using that phrase, whenever something went quite wrong with him—“*E va bene . . . va bene . . .*” and now all the clerks,

\* Reason.

† Oh, very well.

when they spoke about him, had taken to calling him *Professor Vabene*. When he heard his nickname, he smiled, stretched out his neck, hunched his shoulders and gave a deep sigh. . . . Oh, so he'd picked up that habit, without being aware of it. . . . It was a result of his long years of resignation at the blows dealt him by hostile fate. But now, at last, he had a recompense for all that he had suffered, for all that he would have to suffer in future, and he was quite indifferent. Let all the copyists in the world laugh at him, let them call him *Va Bene*, *Va Male*, *Va Zero*—whatever they liked—he had his Satanina and he cared nothing for their gibes. It was on her that his thoughts were fixed during his hours at the Ministry. He could almost see her before him, though she was far away, see her at work in one of the rooms of the humble little flat he had rented in the Via San Niccolo da Tolentino.

On August 15th, 1893, Satanina was safely delivered of a son, Dolfino. The proud father almost went mad in the exuberance of his joy. One thing, however, troubled him—Satanina did not feel strong enough to nurse the baby. It had to be sent out to a foster-mother, in a distant hamlet in the Sabine hills. The professor felt that he must resign himself to that arrangement and give up his cigar, his cup of coffee and a few other little

luxuries, to be able to pay for the expense of the foster-mother.

You may have seen a troupe of acrobats going through their performance, surrounded by a crowd watching with anxious tension. You will have heard the ring-master call out, as he puts one of his wretched performers through his tricks: "Now comes a more difficult turn, gentlemen. Just watch this. We're going on now to a more difficult turn." How many turns, from his birth onwards, had the ring-master Destiny made that poor little clown, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei, perform! But the most difficult of all was still to come. It was due on May 30th, 1894.

On that day, Professor Corvara Amidei returned home at his usual time—exactly half-past six—carrying under his arm a box of meringues, for Satanina simply adored meringues. He climbed the interminable staircase, pulled out his key, fumbled with it until he found the keyhole, opened the door and went in. But Satanina was not in the flat. Where could she be? She never went out at that time of day. Something must indeed have happened to her, for the dining-room table was not laid, nor did the kitchen show any sign of preparation for supper. The fires were out and everything was just as it had been left, all tidy, by the maid who came for the mornings only, to do the

housekeeping and clean the flat. What could have happened to Satanina? Perhaps she had received an urgent summons from Dolfino's foster-mother? But surely she could not possibly have gone off like that, without even sending word to him at the Education Office. He went all the way down the long staircase to ask for news from the hall-porter, made inquiries at a small shop next door, and questioned the servant of the adjoining flat, but no one had anything to tell him. Upstairs, his three little rooms and all their furniture were so still and quiet that they seemed to him to be waiting patiently for the peaceful round of life to begin again. The contrast between their orderly arrangement and the confusion within his own mind became so intolerable that he could not remain there, but started out in search, wandering round at first without any definite goal. Then he went to the telegraph office and despatched an urgent telegram, reply paid, to Dolfino's foster-mother. After that he continued rambling aimlessly here and there, wherever his legs carried him. His head was going round and round like a windmill and he did not even notice that night had fallen. When it seemed as if the time had come for the reply to his telegram, he returned home, hoping to find his Satanina there. But the porter's first words dashed his hopes, and then the professor suddenly felt tired, so tired

that he did not see how he could ever manage to ascend those stairs once again. He did, however, manage it, somehow or other, and entered his flat, all in darkness, groped his way to the bedroom and—still in darkness—threw himself down in an arm-chair, there to wait for her.

After a time, a strange buzzing began to distress him: it seemed to pervade his whole body, to go right through his head, his belly and even his knees and the soles of his feet; its furious rush upset him and made him tremble all over; it drove away thoughts and feelings. He sat on for a while, half-dazed; then he went to the window, to see whether a telegraph-boy might be standing at the front door of the house, and discovered that the loud buzzing—curses on it!—came from down below in the street and was caused by an electric light which had gone out of order.

At last the dawn came, and with it the telegram from the foster-mother—a negative reply. The last gleam of hope had vanished.

A few hours later, the servant arrived to do the day's shopping and tidy up the flat. She was a Tuscan, a rough, hard-featured girl, quick-witted and sharp-tongued.

"Up early!" she exclaimed, seeing her master sitting there, ghastly pale and with a strange dazed look on his face.

"She's not here," he explained, "since yesterday—not here."

"You don't mean it! How dreadful!"

Professor Corvara Amidei threw open his arms, then very slowly subsided again into a chair and stayed sitting there, looking as if he had lost his wits.

"All night long," he added.

"Wherever can she have gone to?" asked the maid.

He answered with another gesture of despair.

"You might have a look, Master," she suggested, "have a look for her down below where there are some . . . some foreigners living—those people who paint. I know that one of them was doing her . . . doing her portrait."

The professor started, then stared at the girl.

"My wife? Her portrait? When?"

"I thought you knew about it. The Mistress used to go there every morning. And then she went again after lunch."

He remained seated, quite still, with his mouth open, and began to stroke his legs with his gnarled hands, very very softly.

"Would you like me, Master, to go and find out? It's only a couple of steps. . . . I know him . . . the French painter."

He did not seem to hear what she said, so the

maid hurried away and returned a few minutes later, flushed and panting. As soon as she regained her breath, she exclaimed:

"Ah! I thought so! He's gone away, too . . . yesterday . . . just the same . . . isn't that funny?"

Professor Corvara Amidei remained sitting silent, his face motionless and with an expression of idiocy. He kept on stroking his legs mechanically. The maid looked at him with pity for some time, then began muttering to herself about her mistress:

"What a fool! She could have gone on living here with her husband, who treated her so well, and who's as quiet as a tortoise, poor man. . . . Come, Master," she said, "cheer up, don't take it so to heart. Don't stay like that! You've got to relieve your feelings. She's a silly fool, not worth bothering about. As for love, shall I tell you what it's like? It's like when you put a pan of milk on the fire—first it swells up, then it comes to the boil and overflows. . . . Come, come, be brave! Try to unburden your heart, Master. Don't sit there like that!"

But the professor made no reply to her simple, friendly exhortations, save by the slightest nod of his head. He did not shed any tears, feeling no interest in the display of his grief to other persons; he would not let himself break down or ask for sympathy or consolation. Deep down in his mind

was a great surprise that he did not feel the poignant grief which he had imagined would come upon him if by some horrible unforeseen calamity he were to lose his Satanina—or to lose her love. The thing that he had at times imagined had now become a reality . . . and he felt nothing, nothing at all! He had half-expected that the world around him would collapse, or anyhow that he would be struck helpless by the blow. And nothing had happened to him—nothing at all! He was able to pay the maid the balance of her month's wages and dismiss her and, when she spoke some further words of encouragement on leaving, he could reply with his usual:

*"E va bene . . . va bene. . . ."*

When he was alone, however, when he sat down again, he suddenly perceived that he no longer had sufficient will-power even to lift a finger. So the world really had collapsed, then, as far as he was concerned! But it had come about so quietly—so quietly that he had not noticed it. The chairs were still there, the wardrobe was there . . . so was the bed . . . but what use would they be to anyone in future. . . .

He continued to rub his legs with both hands and instinctively put more pressure into the movement because he began to notice that a chilly feeling was coming over him—a peculiar sensation

of cold that seemed to be attacking him through his bones. He did not move from his chair, but sat there muttering the scraps of information the maid had given him—"Her portrait. . . . A French artist. . . . She went to him every morning . . ." His teeth began to chatter from ague, while he sat on, automatically rubbing his legs harder and harder, though he could not still their trembling. Three ideas became fixed in his mind—the portrait, the French artist, and the fact that she went to him every morning. These thoughts were like three paper windmills which caught the breeze and whirled incessantly round and round, till he grew quite dizzy from watching them. With a violent shudder, he lost consciousness and fell off his chair and remained lying on the floor.

In March, 1904, nine years and two months had passed by. Professor Corvara Amidei scarcely remembered now how he lay at death's door in the hospital, after having had to go through that *still more difficult turn*. It was the thought of his little son, far away in a hamlet in the Sabine hills, that had saved his life. He had his Dolfino living with him now. The poor child was over ten years old and he looked as if he had only been kept alive with great difficulty, thanks to the most devoted nursing on his father's part. He was very thin and

delicate and threatened with an attack of the same disease that his father had had when a boy at the seminary.

Up to the age of eight Dolfino believed that his mother had died when he was born. But two years ago, one day while his father was away at the office, a sort of lady, dressed very queerly and covered in powder and paint, came to the house and assured him, with floods of tears, that it wasn't true at all, that there she was—his mother—still alive! Yes, she really was his mother and she loved him dreadfully, and she wanted to stay with him always and look after him, day and night, and pet him just as she was doing now—her handsome son, her beloved boy.

At that moment, the boy's foster-mother had entered the flat—she had been left a widow, childless, and had come to Rome in search of her foster-child and was now working as their nurse and general servant. Returning from her morning shopping, she had found the child in that wretched woman's arms and had rushed at her and torn him away. Poor Dolfino listened in terror to the abusive terms hurled by his nurse at the lady who claimed to be his mother. The two women came to blows, and a horrible scene ensued, after which he was confined to his bed by a very serious attack of fever.

Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei had gone to the police station to lay a complaint against the hateful woman, who was not content with all the harm she had done him, but was trying now to ruin the life of the helpless child.

Satanina, long ago, had wanted to wander into the world, "just anywhere." Since then she had wandered a good deal. After running away with the French artist who was painting her portrait, she had been four years in Paris, in Nice and after that Turin and Milan, sinking deeper and deeper. A few days after she reached Rome, her husband caught sight of her. Though he had often pictured her sinking so low, the actual sight of her condition caused him to collapse when he met her in the street, and he had to be helped into a chemist's shop.

He had already fallen into the hands of a Sardinian priest, Don Melchiorre Spanu, whom he had known at Sassari. This priest was firmly determined to bring back to the fold the sheep which had strayed from it so many years before. He provided the professor with one religious treatise after another to read during his long hours of boredom at the office. He proved to him in the most convincing manner that the one and only cause for all the misfortunes the professor had suffered was that in his youth he had behaved so

unworthily towards the Holy Church his Mother, and that it was not without good reason, for sure, that God seemed set on gathering into the abode of his angels and saints that dear lad, that good Dolfino. It was, in fact, a sacred warning so that Professor Corvara Amidei the apostate should, when he found himself left alone in the world, be induced to enter some monastery. For example, there was the Trappist one at the Tre Fontane—a blessed spot, a blessed spot indeed! Just the very place he needed for performing penance.

On hearing these exhortations, Professor Corvara Amidei stretched his neck forward, and hunched his shoulders, and murmured once again, with half-closed eyes:

*"E va bene!"*

Some days, when he left the Education Office, he would find Don Melchiorre waiting for him on one side—up on the steps of Santa Maria Della Minerva—while his wife was posted on the other side, leaning majestically against the steps of the Pantheon. From a distance the two shot savage glances at one another. The priest kept rubbing his chin and cheeks—however often he shaved, they were always covered with fresh bristles. The woman had a treacherous little smile on her painted lips.

When the professor emerged into the square of an evening, he always gave a side-glance at the

railings near where his wife took her stand. He would cross straight over to the priest, though he knew that by the time he had reached the Via Pie Di Marmo she would be sure to catch him up and ask him for a little money—a request he did not know how to refuse; when she asked for his pardon, however, he rebuffed her contemptuously. On meeting the priest, the professor would try to anticipate the severe scolding he expected. Rubbing his hands together and making his usual gesture of resignation, he would exclaim:

*"E va bene! . . . va bene!"*

Meanwhile the spring was now at hand—the most dangerous season for consumptives. The doctor had advised the professor to take Dolfino to the seaside, at least for the first month of spring, when the climate of Rome would be too harsh for him.

So Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei applied for a month's leave and on March 5th, 1904, went to Nettuno to find a small furnished flat, with a view of the sea.

## THE NAKED TRUTH

### CHAPTER II

#### THE PINE-CONE

THE prospect of a restful month's holiday could not have been better. The weather had been rainy up to the previous day, but now the March sun shone clearly and the mildness of the air seemed to announce unmistakably that spring had arrived.

And indeed the professor had barely left the station, and was gazing from the carriage window at the outskirts of Rome, when he thought that he could see the spring in the shape of a quivering pink blush among the soft green of the meadows rushing past him. What could it be? Perhaps a clump of peach trees in blossom. Yes, yes, there was another one—yes, it really was that—and there was another, and yet another. It was spring at last! How many years had passed since he had seen it like this, at its very birth, with the peach trees so pink and gay.

He sighed deeply, and the novel sensation of inhaling the pure, sweet air almost intoxicated him. His eyes filled with tears. He felt that his harsh destiny was making him some concession, in allowing him to enjoy that delightful view. It filled him with a mystic joy; in some inexplicable manner it

carried him far away from the present time, far back into the care-free years of childhood, to the tender memories of his native village. For the moment he forgot all his misfortunes, both past and present—his child so seriously ill, the wretched woman who disgraced his name, the priest who gave him no peace, the fact that he was compelled to live beyond his miserable income in spending all this money that he could not afford, in the hope of poor Dolfino's recovery—a hope which seemed likely to prove illusory. . . . He forgot his gloomy, bitter existence, the intolerable burden of life. Within him all might be dark, but outside was the green of the meadows, the blue of the sky, and that soft freshness in the air, which was the warm breath of spring. Enraptured he continued to gaze at the view.

Yes, life really could be beautiful, but only out there, in the open country, surrounded by all that greenery. There indeed, it was not possible for pitiless fate to persecute him as savagely as in the town, confined within its close streets. He had formed an almost tangible image of that persecution and imagined he could actually feel it following close behind him—a ghastly shadowy form whose presence made him walk bent down under a weight of apprehension. The figure that haunted him was his wife.

He quickly drove away her picture which had suddenly come to block out the lovely view; now he saw the country once again. Look! there were the Alban hills. They seemed to be lifted up into the sky—so light were they that one could scarcely believe that they consisted of solid rock. There was Monte Cave, its summit clad with maples and beeches and, half-way up it, was the old monastery in a wood of pale trees. And there, beyond, was Frascati—sunny Frascati. A flock of sparrows flew up, disturbed by the noise of the train, and above them was a lark poised high overhead on its shining wings. The lark brought back to the Professor the first sentence in the Latin grammar—how many years it was since he taught it! *Alauda est laeta*. He nodded his head. Yes, it almost seemed to him as if his early years as a schoolmaster had also been happy ones, but only before he had started sharing a house with that . . .

"*E va bene!*" he muttered with a sigh, for his mood had clouded again.

His depression did not last long—when they had passed Carroceto station he began to feel that he was near the sea and his soul was filled with nervous gaiety at the thought. He waited in eager expectancy—at any moment now that boundless expanse of blue would lie open to his gaze. Ah! the sea, his dear sea—how many years had passed since he had

looked upon it, how ardent, how poignant was his longing to set eyes upon it again. Yes, there it was! There it was! The professor was so excited that he stood up and put his head out of the window; he inhaled the salt breeze with such eagerness and rapture that he soon felt quite giddy. He fell back on the seat and covered his eyes with his hands.

The train stopped at Anzio for a few minutes, an attractive little town which he had never visited. He spent the time trying to see all of it that was visible from the station. Shortly afterwards he alighted at Nettuno, still upset, intoxicated by that first deep breath which he had taken right into the depths of his lungs, at the sight of the sea—for years he had not breathed so deeply.

The copyists at the Education Office had given him some information about the town. He went to the principal square and asked where he could find a small flat, not too expensive, but it must have a sea-view. He was directed to a little villa just below the square, on the right, looking straight out on to the beach. Those lodgings were really beyond his means—but still he would manage somehow. . . . The house looked out on to the square, facing the artillery barracks used by successive detachments of soldiers who came for target practice. Its front window was barely the height of a mezzanine story above the ground, while the

window of the back room, which gave upon the sea, was as high up as a second story. Looking out, it seemed as if the sea were going to come right into the room—the only thing in sight was the sea. The professor paid the landlord a deposit, said that he would return the following day to take possession and went down to the beach.

Facing the western side of his villa rose the old castle, a majestic construction of the sixteenth century. Its walls, black with age, ran right down to the water's edge. He climbed on to the breakwater below the castle and sat there for an hour in ecstatic contemplation. In the distance, he saw the headland of Monte Circello, which looked like a fragile, ethereal island rising out of the blue sea. Beyond it, following the coastline, came the castle of Stura. Next to him, on his right, was the harbour of Anzio, full of ships, grimy with coal, and beyond that was the boundless expanse of water, glittering in the sunshine, so silent and calm that hardly a ripple broke upon the beach. When he was at last able to tear himself away from the fascinating view, he went to take a light meal. Knowing there was no train back to Rome before five, he decided to devote the three hours' interval to a visit to the magnificent park of the Borghese, half-way between Anzio and Nettuno.

He could not remember when he had spent a

more enjoyable day in all his life, so happy did he feel, as he walked along on that golden afternoon with the green fields and woods on one side and the sea on the other, just below him, at the foot of the cliffs. The entrance gate of the park was open and he wandered in, lost in admiration, and was taking one of the steep paths up the slope, when he heard a shout:

. "Here, stop! You've got to have a ticket . . . five soldi, please."

He looked round and saw a dwarf trotting after him. It was the woman in charge of the lodge gate. He had intended to restrict his expenditure to the utmost, but he paid the sum demanded, and began to wander along the solitary paths which ran like shady tunnels through the wood. He seemed to be walking in a dream. Those magnificent trees belonged to a dream-world; they stood there in silent meditation, and the songs of the birds did not seem to break the silence, but to enhance its mystery. He had been told that in that almost deserted part there were many nightingales and, listening, he fancied that he could hear one in the distance. He followed the direction of the sound, plunging deeper and deeper into the forest, and after a long walk found himself in a marvellous pine-wood: the straight trunks looked like the lofty columns of a gigantic cathedral; far overhead the

tops of the trees were so thick and interwoven that they shut off all sight of the sky. That pine-wood had an atmosphere of its own, coppery, impregnated with the aroma peculiar to the cool, dark interiors of churches.

The professor could walk no further. He took off his hat and sat down, then stretched himself out at full length to meditate.

During long years, with a succession of grave misfortunes, prolonged grief had woven as it were a garment of dull stolidity around his soul. Harassed by the worries of his daily life, his spirit had been unable to rise to the heights of contemplation to which he had been carried in his youth, which had culminated in a temporary loss of sanity, followed by the abandonment of his religious belief. But that day a truce had been called and he was at last able to catch a glimpse of the truth that life is a thing to enjoy. It was only a glimpse, however, for he had the foolish desire to make one more effort first to see daylight in the tangled thicket of mysteries over which he had formerly brooded so deeply: he asked himself why on earth destiny should have thus singled him out for a target for its slings and arrows, seeing that he had never knowingly harmed anyone—on the contrary, he had always tried to do the right thing. He had done right in giving up his clerical vows, because he could no

longer reconcile his sense of reason with that of the fathers of the church. He had done right in marrying an orphan girl in order to provide for her—she had insisted on that condition, though he wanted to provide for her without it and had honourably offered to do so, making the proposal in entire good faith. And now, after his life had been ruined by her disgraceful betrayal and desertion, now he seemed to be doomed to the anguish of seeing his son die a lingering death, of losing his only comfort—poor though that comfort was. Why did such things befall one? Were they from God? No, it could not be God who willed them. If any God existed, He must be kind to men who were good. It would be an insult to God to believe that He existed. Who could it be then? Who was it that governed the world, that controlled the life of unfortunate men?

A pinecone . . . was it a pinecone? Yes, it was an enormous pinecone, which at that moment detached itself from a branch high above and supplied the answer to the professor's question by crashing down on his head.

The poor man lay quite still, stunned, almost as if struck by a thunderbolt. When he came to his senses, he found himself lying in a pool of blood. A long wound ran from the crown of his head right down to the back of his ear and was still bleeding

profusely. Quite dazed, he struggled to his feet and with the greatest difficulty managed to drag himself to the entrance gate. When the dwarf at the lodge saw him returning with his face all smeared with blood, she screamed in horror:

"*Gesu!* What's happened to you?"

He raised a shaky arm and twisted his features into a grin which shewed either pain or amusement, as he stammered in reply:

"It's the . . . the pinecone . . . the pinecone which governs the world . . . that's what did it."

The woman thought him mad; she ran off to summon the assistance of the cowherd at the dairy next door, so that he could get one of the workmen who were repairing the railway line, quite close to the park entrance, to take the injured man to the Orsenigo hospital not far away.

There, the professor's head was shaved and the wound was sewn up with five large stitches, after which a bandage was put on. He was in a hurry to leave, fearing that he would miss his train. When the doctor heard that his patient had to travel, he thought it better to do the place up still more thoroughly; so, in addition to the bandage, he swathed the head in a kind of turban, making it impossible for the professor to put on his hat. When all was ready, Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei hunched up his shoulders and tried very

gently to stretch out his neck, while he half-closed his eyes and sighed, saying once again:

*"E va bene!"*

## CHAPTER III

### THE WIND

"Dear Spring,

"I see no reason why, this particular year, you should arrive before the day which men assign to you in their calendar for your return. Winter has been rather mild and, before he dies, would like to do a little damage at least. He is entitled to that. So he would like you to leave him time to unburden himself of one or two little gales that are worrying him. If that plea does not appeal to you, I may mention that he fears that you will soil your pretty pink feet, if the roads in town and country are all muddy when you make your triumphal entry. Winter—poor old fellow—wants you to know that he is still full of wind and he asks you to be so good as to allow him time, anyhow, to get rid of that. He promises you that he will take the chill out of the air, and clean the ground of all the muck he has put upon it. If you will comply with this

request you will give great pleasure to him and a still greater one to myself. I may tell you that there is a man—quite a good sort—whom I have been looking after, with especial care, from his birth onwards. You can imagine what fun I have been having, tormenting him. Why, only yesterday, while he was going into ecstasies about you, stretched out on the ground in a pine-wood in a magnificent park, I amused myself by dropping on his head a fine, large, hard pine-cone, which might well have killed him. But no. I didn't want to do that. You know well that on my coat-of-arms I have a cat which plays with a mouse instead of killing it. . . .”

Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei had composed this eloquent appeal, on the lines of something he had once read in an old book. He meant it to bring out clearly the cruel behaviour of fate towards him. For a fortnight now he had been saying it over to himself: it was the sort of appeal which he felt quite sure had been addressed to the Goddess of Spring by the Providence who looked after him—an appeal which that Goddess had granted at once. Still wearing his turban, the Professor spent his days sitting at Dolfino's bedside. The child was worn out by persistent fever, an attack which had started as soon as he alighted at Nettuno station. Formerly—at Rome—it was only at night time that the fever came.

But the wind, the wind, the wind! For a fortnight it had not dropped for one moment, either by day or by night. It whistled, it howled, it belled in every note of the scale. Some of its gusts were so prolonged and violent that it seemed as if they would uproot the houses and carry them away. They only threatened to do so, however, for all that they actually succeeded in doing was to take off some tiles, blow down some trees and telegraph posts and smash some windows. At sea the wind amused itself by raising huge waves which rolled right up the beach and crashed with a thunderous uproar against the walls of the house. The Professor felt as if he were on board a ship which was buffeted by a terrific gale. Poor Dolfino was panic-stricken; his father wanted to soothe him with words of comfort, but was unable to utter any. It was not so much the clamour of the waves as that terrible roaring wind—it seemed to rush right through him and not merely deprive him of his voice but even prevent him from breathing. Sunk in the profound silence of despair, the only outlet he found for his feelings was in attending from time to time to the nurse's throat; for, to add to their misfortunes, the poor woman had been attacked by quinsy—she too was confined to bed.

"Please be careful, sir," she implored him, when she saw him approach her with the bottle of car-

bolic acid in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. "Do be careful with it, sir."

She sat up in bed and opened her mouth. Inside, it was all red and inflamed. He did not mean to be lavish, but it almost looked as if the wind beating against the windows shook his arm, for he always managed to splash the stuff about, so that it was only by the greatest good luck that the poor woman's eyes were not burnt out.

"Now spit! Spit it out!" he would say and return to Dolfino, glaring savagely. The bottle of carbolic acid quivered in his hand. Carbolic acid . . . poison . . . no, too little of it, too little and diluted . . . it wouldn't be sure to be enough. . . . Besides, how could he leave Dolfino in his present state? No, he mustn't do it, though he was horribly tempted. . . . That wind was driving him mad.

"A holiday by the seaside!" he muttered to himself.

Half of the month had passed and what had he gained by coming? There was the double rent to pay, the loss of home comforts, the servant's illness and the aggravation of Dolfino's malady. Oh yes, and there was more to add—he had to do all the work for the three of them, light the fire, go out shopping, prepare the meals . . . and to think that he had not been able, for one single minute, to take his child out on the beach! To find himself

shut up there, a prisoner in those three rooms, assailed by the sea and the wind. It was past all bearing. . . .

There came a very gentle knock at the door.

"Who's there?"

To his surprise it was Satanina who entered with a great gust of the gale—Satanina, who wanted to be the fond mother. At all costs she must see her sick child again.

She rushed forward, all dishevelled, and fell on her knees at the professor's feet. He retreated in bewilderment. She caught hold of his coat and cried out:

"Cosmo! Cosmo! for heaven's sake! Let me see Dolfino. Forgive me! Rescue me! Have pity on me!"

Then she burst into a flood of tears, real tears which seemed as if they would never stop. Her whole body was convulsed by sobs, too, sobs no less real than the tears. She refused to get up from the ground, but hid her face in her hands and went on with her entreaties:

"I'll kiss . . . I'll kiss the ground on which you tread, Cosmo, if you'll only forgive me, if you'll rescue me. I can't stand this life any more! I want to belong entirely to my Dolfino in future. Let me help, let me nurse him, for heaven's sake. I implore you. . . ."

## THE NAKED TRUTH

The professor threw himself into a chair and buried his face in his arms. He need not have hidden it, for night had fallen and darkened the room. The bell for the evening prayer sounded and the nurse began reciting the *Ave Maria* in a loud voice, in the hope of averting temptation from her master.

From the back room came the voice of Dolfino, who was nervous as to what was happening:

“Daddy! Daddy!”

Hearing the cry, Satanina leapt up and rushed in to her child.

The professor remained sunk in his chair, listening to the sounds which came from Dolfino’s room—the mother’s kisses and the fond endearments she lavished on her son. Outside, a great change had suddenly come about, a mysterious silence as if the whole world were still. He raised his head and listened in amazement. One of the window-panes was still rattling, but very gently. Ah! that was it—the wind . . . at last the wind had stopped. Could it be possible? He crossed to the window and looked out into the lighted street, across the garden in front which belonged to the officers’ quarters. Yes, the wind had stopped, quite suddenly. He could hear the voices of a party of officers who were coming out into the open after mess, and were clearly in high spirits.

Meanwhile, however, he had left Dolfino in darkness in his bedroom, with Satanina. He went to get a light.

"Let me do it . . . I'll do it," she said at once. "Where is the candle? In the other room?"

She ran out in a great hurry to get it.

"Daddy," Dolfino whispered, "Daddy, I don't want her. . . . She smells of scent. . . ."

"Don't worry, my son, don't you worry."

"But Daddy, where will you sleep? There'll be no bed for you. You must sleep here with me—d'you hear, Daddy?"

"Yes, Sonny, very well . . . don't you worry."

All was silent. But why didn't Satanina return? Couldn't she find the candle? What was she doing? The professor listened intently; then he noticed a cold draught on his legs. It felt as if she had opened a window in the next room. But why?

He stood up, left the bedside, and walked stealthily on tip-toe to the door of the room which had a low window looking out on the square, across to the barracks. Yes, Satanina had opened the window and was standing at it, talking in a low voice to someone just below. Who could it be? Was that shameless woman still at her disgusting tricks? The professor crouched like a tiger and crept up to her without making the slightest sound. He heard her say to the officer standing below:

"No, Gigi darling, not to-night, it's impossible. But to-morrow. . . . I promise you to-morrow."

At these words the professor stooped still lower, caught hold of her feet and with a sudden jerk threw her out of the window, shouting as he did so:

"There you are, Lieutenant! You can catch her."

Frightened by her scream and the shouts from the officer, he drew back from the window, trembling in every limb. He tried to close the shutters, but a noisy crowd of soldiers, officers and civilians was forming just outside, so with tottering steps he dragged himself to his son's room. On the way he met the nurse who had sprung out of bed in her nightdress, and wanted to stop him, to hear what had happened, what he had done to cause such an uproar. He pushed her savagely away and went over to the bed and kissed the child.

"It's nothing . . . nothing at all," he said excitedly, in answer to the son's questions, "really nothing . . . don't be frightened. Only a tile . . . a tile from the roof fell on a lieutenant's head . . . that's all."

There were furious knocks at the front door. The nurse hastily slipped on a dress and ran to open. Two carabineers and a police-sergeant entered, followed by a noisy crowd including a number of soldiers and officers.

"Please wait a moment . . . I'll light a candle . . ." stammered the nurse, terrified at the invasion.

They saw Dolfino kneeling on the bed, and Cosmo Antonio Corvara Amidei clasping him tightly in his arms.

"Now then!" shouted the policeman. "You come along with me."

The professor turned his head round. The crowd which had poured into the room stared with surprise and horror at the corpse-like face with the huge spectacles and turban of bandages.

"Where to?" he asked.

"With me! And no nonsense!" replied the police officer gruffly, taking hold of his shoulder.

"*Va bene*. But what about my child? He's ill. Whom can I leave him with? I should like to explain, sir . . ."

"Stop that!" the policeman interrupted angrily. "Your child will be taken to the hospital. You come along with me!"

Dolfino was shaking all over with terror. The professor made him lie down again in bed. Keeping back his tears with a great effort he kissed him repeatedly, whispering to him to be a brave boy, that nothing serious had happened, that he would soon return to him. One of the carabinieri lost his patience and seized him by the arm.

## THE NAKED TRUTH

"Are you going to handcuff me too?" inquired the professor.

When the handcuffs had been put on him, he bent again over Dolfino and said:

"Sonny . . . my spectacles. . . ."

"What do you want, father?" said the child, who was still trembling with fright.

"Take them off my nose, my dear little boy. . . . There! that's right. . . . Splendid. Now I can't see you any more. . . ."

He turned round towards the crowd, blinking and screwing up his face in a ghastly grin which shewed all his yellow teeth. Hunching up his shoulders, he stretched out his neck, but his distress caused such a lump to rise in his throat that for once he was unable to utter his customary

*"E va bene!"*

# THE WAX MADONNA



## THE WAX MADONNA

YOU know those boxes of toys containing little squat houses, a church with its campanile, dwarf trees with foliage of painted shavings and trunks glued on to round discs of wood to make them stand up—and all the other accessories? Well, imagine the Infant Jesus being given one of these toy sets and amusing himself by building a village for Father Fiorica, the parish priest, and you would see just such a place as the scene of this story. Facing you, the humble church, dedicated to St. Peter; near by, the vicarage with starched muslin curtains hanging across its three small windows—peeping through them, you would have a glimpse of the spotless rooms, flooded with sunlight, always so quiet and restful; beside the vicarage is its little garden with a rose pergola, Japanese medlars, pomegranates, and orange and lemon trees; then, all round, are the houses in which the vicar's parishioners live. A few narrow streets and still narrower lanes divide the village into irregular blocks. Flocks of pigeons flutter from one rooftop to another; timid rabbits sneak quietly by, keeping close to the walls; plump hens

bicker together, and there are pigs too who always seem a little out of temper, perhaps upset because they have put on too much fat.

Who shall blame Father Fiorica for refusing to believe that the devil could enter into so idyllic a spot? Nevertheless, the devil did enter with the greatest facility and whenever the fancy seized him. He slipped in, thanks to his power of assuming the form of a godly man or woman; or at other times he would change himself into some apparently harmless object. So that it would be safe to assert that Father Fiorica spent the livelong day in the devil's company, without having the least inkling of the fact. It is only fair to mention that the reason he had no inkling is that, when it came to dealings with that good priest, even the devil could not be really wicked; all he could do was to amuse himself by making the reverend gentleman succumb to minor temptations. At the worst, the priest's sins, if brought to light, only resulted in his being laughed at—quite kindly—by his congregation or by his colleagues or ecclesiastical superiors.

As an example of the tricks played by the wicked old devil, I may mention that he persuaded one of the parishioners—an elderly lady who had gone to Rome to attend the Jubilee celebrations—to bring back a gift to the Reverend Father in the shape of a handsome ivory snuff-box with a portrait of

the Pope painted in enamel on the lid. Well, it may sound incredible, but, despite the guardianship of that holy portrait, the foul fiend took up his quarters in that box and for more than a month started tempting Father Fiorica at evening service, just when he was letting himself go, in his short sermon to his congregation, before the benediction.

"Come along!" the tempter would whisper. "Just one little pinch. . . . The lady who gave you that handsome snuff-box is looking at you. Give her the satisfaction of seeing you use it. . . . Come, just one little pinch!"

The evil spirit was so persistent with his suggestions that at last, on one occasion, Father Fiorica yielded to his prompting and pulled the snuff-box out of his pocket, together with his large bandana handkerchief. Now the priest had only started taking snuff on receipt of the gift of that snuff-box and he was still very nervous in the practice of his new accomplishment. He had good reason to be, for his sermon was interrupted by a series of at least forty sneezes with many angry interludes of violent nose-blowing, sending the whole congregation into fits of laughter.

It was still worse, however, when that wicked demon sneaked into the heart of a beautiful but half-witted girl called Marastella. Though she was

thirty, she still had the mind of a child and was in a perpetual state of wonder and so credulous that everyone found amusement in the exhibition of her utter simplicity. Well, the devil managed to find a way into the heart of poor Marastella and made her fall in love (in an unseemly, public fashion) with Father Fiorica—who was a man of about sixty and had snow-white hair.

She attended church regularly and gazed with rapture at him as he stood before the altar during Mass or in the pulpit when preaching. In an agony of love, she beat both hands on her bosom, and with great tears streaming from her eyes she kept exclaiming:

“Oh, Blessed Virgin, how handsome he is—his eyes are like two stars, and his lips are sweet as honey! My beloved, how fine he looks and how beautifully he speaks!”

The affair would have given rise to scandal had not everyone known how holy and chaste a life the vicar led, and that the poor girl was not really responsible for her actions. As it was, people only laughed.

One day, however, catching sight of the Reverend Father coming out of the church, Marastella knelt down in the middle of the little square, seized his hand as he passed and began to kiss it passionately, pressing it fondly against her head and

face and even below her neck, murmuring with a sigh:

"Oh, Father dear, I feel all on fire. Take away this fire from me, for pity's sake. For pity's sake, save me from this fire!"

Poor Father Fiorica felt quite confused and did not even try to draw his hand away. He bent over the unfortunate girl and asked:

"What do you mean, Marastella? Where is the feeling of fire, my daughter?"

He might perhaps never have known what she wanted, if the women from the houses round had not rushed up and hustled the half-witted girl away. Their manner and the words they used were too plain to be misunderstood. Astounded and horrified at the meaning of her request, the priest turned and hurried away with trembling steps, holding up his two hands in the form of a cross to avert the powers of evil.

On this occasion, the devil had disclosed his hand too openly, for everyone could see that it was his work—that infatuation of Marastella's. He soon, however, thought out another trick, which was to cause Father Fiorica the greatest regret that he ever felt in all his days. The story is about the loss of Guiduccio, which I will now relate to you.

Guiduccio was a nine-year-old boy, the only son

in the Greli family, who were the leading residents of the parish.

For a number of years past, it had been a cause of great pain to Father Fiorica that this family had held themselves aloof from the church. It was not that they had any actual hostility to religion, but because, in Signor Greli's opinion, the Catholic Church had taken up a position of persistent hostility to the nation. He was a Genovese carabinieri, who had fought under Garibaldi, served in the campaign of 1860 and been wounded in the arm at the battle of Milazzo. As a patriotic Italian, he was not prepared to set foot in the church while the Papacy was at enmity with the government of his country.

The priest had never bothered his head about politics and was therefore quite unable to see why patriotic feeling should prevent Guiduccio's mother, his elder sisters, and the boy himself, from attending church service, at least on Sundays and on the principal saints' days. He would not go so far as to say that they ought to come to confession or the Holy Communion, but—really—to attend the service on a Sunday, that was not asking much. Tempted as usual by the devil (who was always hovering near him as close as his own shadow), Father Fiorica did his best to make an amiable impression on Signor Greli.

"Look! He's coming this way. You mustn't pretend you don't see him. Give him a greeting. You be the first to make advances. Make a stately bow—a blend of humility and dignity!"

The vicar complied promptly with the devil's suggestion and bowed and smiled. Signor Greli, however, looked cross and only returned the faintest of acknowledgments to the friendly greeting. The devil chuckled at the good man's mortification.

One summer afternoon, which happened to be the eve of a solemn feast-day, Signor Greli returned to his house tired out from a hard morning's work and lay on his bed to recover his energy by a brief doze. What do you think the devil did then? He went—unseen—in company with some youths who were going up into the belfry of the little church of St. Peter, and began to ring all the bells with a maddening clangour. Now Signor Greli had always been a hot-tempered man and it did not take much to get him into a towering passion. A time came when he could stand the din no longer, but leapt out of bed, seized his gun and rushed out on to his balcony, just as he was, dressed only in his vest and pants, and—would you believe it!—committed the sacrilegious act of shooting at the holy church bells.

The former carabineer was a crack shot. He

## THE NAKED TRUTH

selected the right-hand bell of the three, that being the shrillest-toned. Poor bell! Its note changed suddenly, as when a small dog is noisily welcoming its master and someone hits the poor animal treacherously with a stone, and the joyful greeting ends abruptly in lamentable yelps. The faithful worshippers, who had assembled in front of the church in readiness for the solemn festivities, were furious at the act of desecration and a riot seemed imminent. Father Fiorica came out looking very nervous, still wearing his sacred garments. Under God's providence he was fortunately able to assert his authority in time to prevent his indignant parishioners from their proposed attack on the Greli's house. He quieted them down by his personal guarantee that Signor Greli would present the church with a new bell and that its christening would be made the occasion of a solemn function to be celebrated with even greater festivities than those now marred by the sacrilege.

. . . . .

It was for the inaugural ceremony that Guiduccio Greli entered the church of St. Peter for the first time in his life. The Reverend Father Fiorica would have liked the bell to be christened by Signora Greli or at any rate by one of the daughters, the eldest of whom was about eighteen. But he was

glad, later, that Signor Greli would not grant this request of his, and would only permit the small boy to perform the baptism; for Guiduccio's participation in the function led to a miraculous change of heart. It may have been due to the excitement of the festivities, or perhaps to the kind welcome given to the child by all the members of the congregation; or—more probably—because he was the first person to produce a sound from the consecrated bell after climbing to the top of that belfry, all open to the bright blue sky; in any case, whatever the cause, the fact remains that from that day onward the voice of the new bell, ringing for early morning service, drew the boy to the church. As soon as he heard it ring, he sprang out of bed and tip-toed off to find the elderly maid-servant, who always went to early Mass, and begged her to take him with her.

"But I don't think daddy would like it," she would reply.

Guiduccio, however, insisted on accompanying her. Each note from his bell called to him through the silent dawn and made him quiver with eagerness. The thrill persisted, as he clung to the old servant during their walk along the narrow lane, where the gloom of night still lingered. When they reached the little square in front of the church, he raised his eyes to the belfry and felt an uncanny sense of awe; but when he entered the solemn

precincts—cool and shadowy and incense-perfumed—and saw the candles burning so peacefully upon the altar, an equally mysterious feeling of comfort and well-being stole over him.

On the first occasion on which the Reverend Father, turning from the altar to the congregation, caught sight of Guiduccio with his mass of brown curls, kneeling in front of the railing, his hands joined in prayer, his large eyes wide open and shining with what seemed a divine madness, a great wave of tenderness came over the priest and he had to make a violent effort to overcome the temptation to descend the altar steps and bestow a caress on the little cherub. When the service ended, he signed to the old woman to take the child into the vestry. There he picked Guiduccio up and kissed his forehead and hair and then exhibited to him one by one the sacred vestments and ornaments—the laced cloaks with golden fringes, the surplices, stoles, mitres and maniples, all odorous with incense and wax. Then, by gentle persuasion, he induced the child to promise that he would confess to his mother that he had come to church that morning, at the summons of his holy bell, and would beg her to allow him to come there again. Finally he invited Guiduccio—always with his mother's permission—to come to the vicarage, and see the pretty flowers in his garden, and he promised to shew him

some pictures of saints and coloured illustrations in his books, and tell him some little stories.

Guiduccio went every day to the vicarage, looking forward excitedly to hearing more tales from the Bible. When Father Fiorica saw the pale, intent little face, with the large bright eyes dilated with wonder, his heart overflowed with gratitude to God, in that He had granted him the happiness of seeing that marvellous florescence of faith in the simple mind of the child. Sometimes at the most thrilling point in the story, Guiduccio would throw his arms round Father Fiorica's neck and hug him violently; at those moments the good Father felt such joy and at the same time such nervous apprehension that his soul seemed to be torn in two. His eyes filled with tears, as he solemnly laid his hands upon the child, exclaiming:

"My son! my son! What does the Lord want from you?"

. . . . .

All this time, however, the devil lay in ambush behind the arm-chair in which Father Fiorica sat with Guiduccio on his knees and, as usual, the good priest was unaware of his presence. Father Fiorica really should have been observant enough to notice that occasionally a sort of shadow passed over the child's face, with a slight suggestion of a frown, and

## THE NAKED TRUTH

that these signs of discontent were due to the latitude the priest allowed himself as to some portions of his Bible stories, glossing over certain facts and making indulgent excuses for others. Such paltering with the truth caused much distress to the boy, who was of quick intelligence, and who may well have imbibed a spirit of mistrust in his home, perhaps because his father and sisters had often joked at his expense.

Now I will tell you how the devil scored a victory, thanks to his observation of these and other trifling indications which escaped the good Father's notice.

Every week during May—the month dedicated to the Blessed Virgin—a raffle was held among the worshippers at St. Peter's Church, the prize being a little waxen Madonna in a glass case. After the sermon and the recital of the prayers of the rosary, the blessing was pronounced and then hymns in praise of the Mother of God were sung to the organ accompaniment, after which the drawing of lots took place. The women and children knelt as they sang, their gaze riveted upon the little Madonna, which stood on the altar, surrounded by lighted candles and a great mass of roses. Everyone longed to be the lucky person and draw the Madonna, though a good few of the women, when they saw Guiduccio praying away with such fer-

vour, admired his devotion so much that they would even have preferred that he win the prize, rather than one of themselves. Father Fiorica naturally longed for this result more ardently than any of them.

The tickets for the lottery cost one soldo each. It was the sacristan's duty to sell them during the week and to write the name of each purchaser on his ticket. On the Sunday, all the tickets were collected and placed in a large glass bowl and well mixed. Amid the breathless suspense of the kneeling congregation, Father Fiorica put his hand into the bowl, gave the tickets a further stir and then picked one out and held it aloft. He unfolded it and examined it through the spectacles perched on the tip of his nose, and read out the name. Then the little Madonna was escorted to the house of the winner, with beating of drums and singing of hymns.

Father Fiorica pictured to himself how jubilant Guiduccio would be, if his name were drawn. As he stirred the urn, he looked at the child kneeling before the altar and longed that by some miraculous help his fingers should be enabled to detect which of the tickets had the boy's name written on it. He felt just a trifle annoyed by the child's generosity—his mother gave him half a lira as pocket-money every Sunday, and he might well have taken ten

tickets, but was satisfied with buying only a single one, so that he should not have any advantage over the other boys. He even spent the remaining nine soldi in buying tickets for them.

"Who can say," thought the priest, "what might come of it if the little Madonna were taken with such pomp and ceremony to the boy's home? It might even prove powerful enough to bring back the whole Greli family to Mother Church."

Such was the idea with which the devil tempted Father Fiorica. On the last Sunday of the month he went even further: the solemn moment for the drawing of the lots had arrived and the priest ascended the steps of the altar, on which stood the little wax Madonna, beside the glass bowl. Then the devil slipped up behind him and whispered to him, very gently, a wicked suggestion—nothing less than that he announce the name of Guiduccio Greli as if he were reading it out from the ticket. There was an outburst of jubulation from the members of the congregation when the priest pronounced the name, but Guiduccio turned as red as fire and then became intensely pale. His beautiful eyes clouded over. He frowned, shivered violently and hid his face in his arms. A number of women came up to congratulate and kiss him, but he slipped away from them and ran from the church. In the shelter of his home, he threw himself into

his mother's arms and broke into a frenzied fit of sobs and tears. A few minutes later, they heard the drums and hymns of the approaching congregation who were escorting the little Madonna to his house. Guiduccio stamped his feet and struggled wildly in the arms of his mother and sisters, screaming:

"It isn't true! I didn't win her! I don't want her! Send her away! It isn't true! I don't want her!"

What had happened was this: Guiduccio had disposed as usual of the ten soldi which his mother had given him for his pocket-money on the previous Sunday: he had given nine of them to poor children of the parish so that they could each take a ticket in the lottery; then, when he was on the way to the vestry with the remaining soldo—kept for himself—he had met a small boy, barefooted and unkempt, who had been ill for the past three weeks and so had been unable to enter for the lotteries for the preceding Madonnas. Guiduccio had that last soldo in his hand and, seeing it, the child had asked whether he would give it to him. So Guiduccio had given it.

How often had Signor Greli cautioned his son in a tone of friendly banter:

"You look out, Duccio, my boy. I see you're very thick with the church. You'd better take

care! That priest of yours means to get you into his clutches!"

Daddy had been right, for how could he—Guiduccio—have won the lottery on that last Sunday, when there was no ticket in his name that week?

To soothe her son's distress, Signora Greli ordered the little wax Madonna to be sent back to the church. And from that day on, Father Fiorica saw no more of Guiduccio Greli.

# THE RED BOOKLET



## THE RED BOOKLET

NISIA is a bustling little town squeezed into the narrow strip of coast on the southern side of Sicily.

Towns, like human beings, are often born in unsuitable surroundings; for a town, like a baby, is not born where or how it wishes, but starts life in a place where natural laws call it into being. If too many persons come there—or are born there—and there is not enough room for them, the town is bound to grow up badly.

Nisia, if it wanted to grow, could only do so by climbing up, one house on top of the other, until it reached the overhanging clay and limestone plateau, which descends in precipitous cliffs to the sea on either side of the town. On that wide, breezy plateau, Nisia could have expanded freely, but it would then have been too far distant from the sea. If anyone had insisted on building a house up there, you may be sure that, one fine day, it would have come down on to the beach; for it is below, on the shore, that life urges.

On that plateau, the inhabitants of Nisia have

planted only their cemetery. There is breathing space up there—for the dead.

“When we’re up there, we’ll be able to breathe,” they say in Nisia; down below, on the shore, they cannot breathe—down there, in the thick of the noisy, dusty traffic in sulphur, coal, timber, grain and salted meats, they cannot breathe. They must go up on to the plateau for air, and since they go there when they die, they envy the dead who lie above and have room to breathe. It is a very consoling thought.

. . . . .

We must make allowance for the inhabitants of Nisia, for it is not easy to remain decent and virtuous in such foul surroundings. The houses are horribly crowded together and are more like dens than houses: they exhale a damp, musty stench which in the long run breaks down all decent feeling. The stench is aggravated by the presence in these huts of pigs and hens and, not infrequently, of a fidgety pack-horse or mule. The smoke finds no outlet, but stagnates there, blackening the ceiling and the walls where the guardian saints, in their cheap prints, look down with an air of disgust under their layer of soot.

The men notice the squalor less, worn out as they are by their long day’s toil on the ships or wharves;

but the women are oppressed by their environment—driven nearly mad by it. Almost the only outlet they can find for their fury is to give birth to children, and they have enormous families—one twelve babies, another fourteen, another sixteen. True, they cannot manage to bring up more than three or four of them, but the babies who die in infancy help to provide for the upbringing of the three or four who are so lucky (or unlucky!) as to survive. The dead babies even provide for the survivors' marriages, for each woman who loses a baby hastens to the Foundling Hospital and takes over one of the children there. With each foundling is handed out a red booklet which provides an income of thirty lire a month for some years to come.

The cloth merchants of Nisia are Maltese. Even when born in Sicily, they are still known as the Maltese. "To go to the Maltese" means, in Nisia, to lay in supplies of household linen and the like. The Maltese, armed with their measuring rods, go about the little town doing a busy trade. They buy up the red booklets on a large scale, advancing against each of them two hundred lire of goods—the usual outfit for a bride. Thus the girls of Nisia are married by the means of the red booklets of the foundlings—the advances to be paid for afterwards by their mothers' milk.

At the end of each month, it is amusing to watch the procession of potbellied, taciturn Maltese on their way to the town hall. They wear embroidered slippers and black silk skullcaps and carry a silver and ivory snuffbox in one hand and in the other a big blue handkerchief done up as a bundle containing seven or ten or fifteen of the foster-mothers' red booklets. The municipal cashier's room has a window opening on to a dusty corridor where the Maltese sit in a row on a long bench. There they await their turn, dozing peacefully, or taking snuff and languidly slapping at the flies that settle on them. It is by now the established practice that the foster-mothers' payments should be made to the Maltese.

The cashier shouts a woman's name—"Rosa Marenga."

"Here I am," answers one of the Maltese.

. . . . .

Rosa Marenga De Nicolao was famous at the Nisia town hall. For over twenty years she had had an almost unbroken series of the red booklets, on which the usurious Maltese had made a fine profit. No one knew how many of her children had died in infancy. She could no longer herself remember the number. But she had brought up four, all girls.

Three of them were already married and now the fourth was shortly to wed.

By this time, it was hard to say whether Rosa Marenga was a woman or an old rag. She was by now so dilapidated a creature that the Maltese merchants who had supplied the wedding outfit for her first three daughters, refused to give her credit on account of the fourth.

"Don't take it on, Signora Rosilla," they said.

"What! I'm not to take it on? You dare to say that to *me*!"

She regarded it as a gross insult to one who had shewn for so many years that she came of a strain of good milkers. However, the taciturn Maltese are not open to argument, and all she could do was to stand in front of their shops and voice her disapproval in angry shouts. If the people at the hospital had entrusted a foundling to her, wasn't that a proof that they considered her capable of feeding it? But the Maltese, sitting behind their counters in the back of the shop, replied only with a shake of the head and a quiet smile. It was not that they lacked confidence in the judgment of the doctor or of the municipal commissioner whose duty it was to supervise the lot of the foundlings received at the hospital: the Maltese knew that when a mother has a daughter to marry off (and can only manage it by means of the red booklet), both doctor and

commissioner agree that she deserves greater consideration than a mere foundling does. For if a foundling dies, what harm is done? None but the foundling suffers and no complaints are made.

A daughter is a daughter, whereas a foundling is only a foundling. If the daughter does not marry, there is the danger that she too will start increasing the number of foundlings, for which the municipality will have to provide. However, though the death of a foundling is a stroke of luck for the municipality, it means an unprofitable transaction for the Maltese, even if he succeeds in regaining possession of the goods he advanced. For this reason it is not uncommon to see the Maltese paying visits of inspection at certain times of the day. Under pretext of a walk for recreation, they push their way through the filthy lanes, swarming with sunburnt, naked babies, chickens and pigs caked with mud. The foster-mothers of the red booklets sit at their thresholds gossiping or more frequently bickering. The Maltese take as much care of the foundlings as the women take of their young pigs. Cases have been known where a Maltese was in such despair at the deplorable state of one of the babies that he even went so far as to provide a little drink of milk for it, by calling in his own wife to suckle it for half an hour a day.

After much trouble, Rosa Marenga at last suc-

ceeded in coming to terms with a Maltese, a small man who had only recently set up in business and was not in the front rank of merchants. He promised to give her credit for the trousseau, advancing it in instalments and only up to one hundred and forty lire, not the usual two hundred. The bridegroom and his people accepted the reduced dowry and the marriage was arranged.

The foundling was cradled in an old sack suspended from two ropes across a corner of the hovel and raised a little at the top so that he would not be suffocated in it. As he was famished, he screamed from morning till night. Rosa's daughter, Tuzza, busied herself preparing her trousseau, making love, or chatting and laughing with her fiancé. From time to time she gave a pull at the string fastened to the primitive cradle and started it swinging.

"Now then, my fine fellow! Quiet! Be quiet there. . . . Holy Mother of God, what a little heretic that foundling is!"

By "heretic" she meant that he was restless, cross, bad-tempered and dissatisfied, and the use of the word in this connection implies a kindly attitude by orthodox Christians towards heretics, for a drink of milk would promptly and certainly have turned the infant into a good Catholic. But alas! Mamma Rosa had very little milk to give him.

Tuzza had no alternative but to resign herself to the accompaniment of those despairing screams right up to her wedding day. If it were not that *she* must be married, Mamma Rosa, in all conscience, would never have taken on this last foundling from the hospital. It was on her account that her mother had taken it, on her account that the child was screaming—that she might do her love-making. And love has such power that the girl was deaf to the screams of the famished baby.

The fiancé, who was employed as a stevedore, came to the house every evening when his work in the harbour was over. If the night was fine, the mother, daughter and her young man walked up on to the plateau to get a breath of air in the moonlight, and the foundling was left to scream alone in the dark, hanging in his make-shift cradle in the locked hovel. The neighbours were infuriated by the noise he made, though they felt sorry for him. They agreed in pitying him—so much so that they hoped it would not be long before he died. His uninterrupted screams got on their nerves.

At last, even the little pig was irritated and rolled over and over, grunting angrily; while the hens, huddled together beneath the stove, muttered restlessly to one another. One of them had had a brood of chickens and remembered the anguish she had once felt when she heard the dis-

tant cry of a chick which had lost its way. With bristling crest and flapping wings, she had rushed here and there, uneasy and wretched until she found it. That baby, she decided, must also have lost its way; how was it that its mother did not hasten up in answer to its repeated cries?

Hens are such stupid creatures that they will sit on eggs which are not their own, and when chickens are born from such eggs, they are unable to distinguish them from their own, but love them equally and bring them up with the same devotion. So they do not know that to the young of the human race, the warmth of a mother is not sufficient—milk is also a necessity. But the little pig knew that, for he too had needed milk, and had obtained it plentifully; for his mother, though she was only a sow, was delighted to give it him by day or night, as much as he could hold. It was incomprehensible to him that anyone should scream like that from lack of milk, and he fidgeted restlessly in his dark lair, grunting his annoyance against the little one hanging in the cradle above. He too decided that the child was a "heretic."

Come, baby, do let the drowsy pig, the hens and all the neighbours go off to sleep. You can be sure that Mamma Rosa would give you milk, if she had any; but she has none. If your real mother, your unknown mother, had no pity on you, what can

you expect from this woman, since she must first feel pity for her own daughter? Let her have a breath of fresh air up on the heights after her tiring day of heavy work; let her take pleasure in the happiness of her daughter who is walking in the moonlight, arm in arm with the man she loves and whom she is soon to marry. If only you could see how the moon spreads a shining veil of embroidery up there in the dewy night—if you could hear the sweet night sounds and breathe the scented air, you would realise that there are moments when the human heart overflows with a desire for love. That is why Tuzza is vowing that she will be a fond mother to her babies.

Come, poor little one, take one of your tiny fingers instead of a teat and suck away at it until you fall asleep. Your finger, did I say? Good God! What have you done to the thumb of your left hand? Why, it has swollen so enormously that you can hardly get it into your mouth! It is the only big part of your thin, cold, paralysed hand, the only big part of your whole body. With that thumb in your mouth, you have sucked yourself clean away until you have nothing left but skin, stretched round the little bones of your carcass. How can you still manage to find the strength to scream like that?

It seemed a miracle—when the foster-mother, daughter and fiancé returned one evening from their walk in the moonlight, they found the hut sunk in absolute silence.

“For heaven’s sake, be quiet!” the mother warned the young couple, who wanted to linger talking in front of the door. They promised to be quiet, but Tuzza could not help laughing rather loudly every now and then at something her lover whispered in her ear, at a word or a kiss—one could not tell which, in the dark.

Mamma Rosa went inside the hovel, approached the cradle and listened intently. All was silent. A ray of moonlight entered through the doorway and reached across the dark room, like a long, tenuous ghost; it fell on the ground below the stove, where the hens were gathered. One of the birds was worried by it and began to cluck, but quite gently. Curses on that hen! Curses on the old husband, too, who returned at that moment from the wine-shop, drunk as usual, and stumbled against the door as he tried to pass round the engaged couple.

The surprising thing was that none of these noises roused the baby: usually he slept so lightly that he would wake if a fly flew near him. Mamma Rosa was quite frightened; so she lighted the lamp and looked into the cradle. She put out her hand

cautiously and touched the baby's forehead. Then she screamed.

Tuzza rushed in, but her lover remained outside the door, confused and alarmed. Mamma Rosa was shouting something to him. She was shouting to him to come in at once and quickly untie one of the ropes which supported the cradle in the corner. But why . . . why? . . . "Be quick! be quick!" she screamed. *She* knew what she was about, but the young man did not understand; he seemed petrified by the deathly silence of the infant and, unable to move a step, stood nervously scowling in the doorway. So Mamma Rosa herself, before the neighbours could arrive on the scene, climbed hurriedly on to a chair and pulled away the rope, calling to Tuzza to attend to the laying out of the dead baby.

What a disaster! How terrible! The rope had dropped off of itself—how could it possibly have happened? It had dropped off and the child had fallen from the cradle and been killed. . . . They had found him lying on the ground, stark and cold. What a frightful accident!

The last of the neighbours summoned by her screams returned to their houses to sleep, but she continued to weep and howl and kept it up all night long. At early dawn she started relating the story of the tragedy to all who stopped at the door.

Killed by a fall, indeed! The little corpse bore no wound, livid patch or bruise. The two things remarkable about it were its ghastly state of emaciation, and, on the left hand, that enormous thumb.

The municipal doctor came to inquire into the death and went away again, shrugging his shoulders and looking very dissatisfied, for the neighbours were unanimous in asserting that the child had been starved to death. The fiancé, who knew well how worried Tuzza must be, did not come near the house at all. His mother and married sister came instead, very silent and cold in their manner. There they stood with disdainful, pursed-up lips, watching the scene which ensued when the Maltese—the man who had only recently set up as a cloth merchant—rushed excitedly into the hut to take back the goods he had advanced. Rosa Marenga screamed her protests, tore her hair, slapped her face, beat upon her chest and bared her breasts to show that they still held milk. She implored his pity and compassion on her daughter, whose marriage was so near at hand; she begged him in heaven's name to give her at least until nightfall, so that she would have time to go and see the mayor, the magistrate, and the doctor of the Foundling Hospital. Tousled and ragged as she was, she hurried off to the town hall, holding up

her arms in gestures of despair and proclaiming her grievance at the top of her voice. The street urchins hissed at her as she passed and shouted mocking comments.

The neighbours remained in front of the door excitedly discussing the affair. In the centre of the crowd stood the Maltese, who had posted himself on guard over his property, and the fiancé's mother and sister, who were anxious to see how the affair was going to end. One of the neighbours, a good-natured woman, went inside the hovel and, with some assistance from the weeping Tuzza, washed and dressed the dead baby.

The wait was a long one and the neighbours at last grew tired and drifted away to their houses; the fiancé's relatives also went home, but the Maltese stayed on guard firmly determined not to move from the spot.

Towards evening a crowd again collected before the door, when the municipal hearse arrived to take the baby's body to the cemetery.

The little pine-wood coffin had already been nailed up and was just being transferred to the hearse, when the crowd broke into a chorus of hisses interspersed with cries of amazement and mocking remarks. Rosa Marenga was seen arriving, radiant and triumphant: in her arms was yet another little foundling.

## THE RED BOOKLET

"Here he is! Here he is!" she screamed while still some distance away, and held out the baby for her daughter to see. The girl's tears ceased flowing and a happy smile broke over her face, while the hearse started on its slow journey to the cemetery.



# THE FLY



## THE FLY

TWO young men were climbing the steep, chalky ridge below the village. They used their hands as well as feet, because their hobnailed boots kept slipping. They were out of breath from their hurry and, between gasps, cursed the slippery track. As soon as their purple faces appeared over the ridge, the crowd of women who were chattering round the little well at the entrance to the village, turned to look at them. Surely those were the Tortorici brothers? Yes, Neli and Saro Tortorici. Poor fellows! Why were they in such a desperate hurry?

Neli, the younger brother, felt unable to move another step and stopped to draw breath and reply to the women's questions; but Saro caught hold of his arm and dragged him on.

"It's our cousin—Giurlannu Zaru!" said Neli as he turned on his way. He raised his hand as if appealing to heaven.

The women broke out into exclamations of sympathy and horror. One of them called after the brothers:

"Who did it?"

## THE NAKED TRUTH

"No one. It was God!" cried Neli from a distance.

The youths hurried on to the house of the parish doctor, which stood in the village piazza.

. . . . .

Doctor Sodoro Lopiccolo was pacing up and down the living-room with his shirt unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled up, and a pair of old slippers on his feet. His eyes were bleared and puffy from lack of sleep, and on his flabby cheeks was a growth of beard of at least ten days. He carried in his arms a girl of about nine, all skin and bone and yellowed by disease.

His wife had been bed-ridden for the past eleven months. There were six children in the house, in addition to the one he had in his arms, who was the eldest. They were a wild brood of dirty, ragged little savages, and the house was in a terrible state of disorder—bits of crockery, fruit skins and heaps of filth on the floor, the chairs broken and the seats of the arm-chairs in holes, the beds not made for who could say how long, and the bed-clothes in tatters; for the boys amused themselves by pillow-fights in bed, the little rascals!

The one thing which had escaped the general ruin was a portrait hanging on the wall of what had once been the drawing-room. It was a photo-

graphic enlargement of Doctor Sidorio Lopiccio, taken when he was a young man, shortly after he had got his diploma. In the portrait he looked spruce, even foppish, gay and smiling.

Dragging his slipshod feet, he walked over to this picture, shewed his teeth as he grinned amiably at it and held out his arms, presenting the sick girl to it.

"So there you are, Sisine," he said.

"Sisine" was the pet name his mother had called him by, if she wanted to tease him, in the far-off days when he had been her darling, the hope of the family, whose future was to be a glorious one.

Sisine, indeed!

He received the two peasants with the savagery of a mad dog.

"What do you want?"

Saro Tortorici, cap in hand, replied, still gasping for breath.

"Signor Doctor . . . a poor fellow—a cousin of ours—is at death's door."

"Lucky chap! Have the joy-bells rung!" shouted the doctor.

"Oh no, your Honour. . . . He's dying. . . . He was taken ill all of a sudden. . . . We don't know what it is. He's at the Montelusa farm, lying in a stable.

The doctor drew back a step and broke out fiercely:

"At Montelusa! My God!"

It was, he knew, seven good miles by the road from his village—and what a road!

"Yes, your Honour. Come as quick as you possibly can, for pity's sake," Tortorici implored. "He's turned all black, like a piece of liver, and so swollen that it's frightening to look at him. *For pity's sake, come!*"

"What! On foot?" yelled the doctor. "Ten miles on foot? You're mad. A mule—I want a mule, d'you hear? Have you got a mule?"

"I'll run and get one at once," Tortorici hastened to answer. "I'll get one lent me."

"Meanwhile," said Neli, the younger brother, "I'll be off and get a quick shave."

The doctor gave him a look as if he wanted to devour him.

"It's Sunday to-day, sir," said Neli in excuse, and smiled with some embarrassment. "I'm engaged to be married, you see, sir. . . ."

"Oh! So you're going to get married, are you?" sneered the doctor, beside himself with rage. "Here, take this child then."

With these words, he thrust the sick girl into the young man's arms, then seized one by one the other children who were crowding round and pushed

them violently towards him, crying, "and this one," "and this one," "and this one," "and this one." . . . "Damned fool!" he concluded, "you damned fool. . . ."

He turned and made as if he were going away, then came back, took the sick girl again in his arms and shouted to the two brothers:

"Be off with you! Get a mule and I'll come at once."

Neli Tortorici was all smiles again as he went down the staircase, following his brother. He was twenty years old, and Aluzza, his fiancée, was sixteen and very beautiful. Seven children? That wasn't enough—he wanted a dozen! It is true that he had no means of providing for them other than the strong pair of arms which God had given him, but he was ready to undertake anything with unfailing cheerfulness. His two delights were to wield the scythe and to sing: people called him Liolà (the poet) because of his habit of improvising songs while he worked. He knew that he was a general favourite, on account of his very obliging disposition and unfailing good humour, and he bestowed a smile even on the air he breathed. The sun had not yet succeeded in tanning his skin or dulling his bright, curly hair, which was a rich gold and the envy of the women. How many women blushed in confusion when he looked at them—in a

certain way—with those sparkling blue eyes of his!

He was horribly upset over his cousin Zaru's illness, and even more concerned over the fact that his Luzza would undoubtedly be very cross with him—for had she not been longing for six days past for Sunday to arrive, so that she could be with him for at least a few hours. But how could he, in all conscience, get out of performing an act of Christian charity? Poor Giurlannu Zaru! He too was engaged to be married—and now this blow had fallen on him with terrible suddenness. He had been at work, beating the almond trees, down on Lopes' farm at Montelusa. The morning before—that was Saturday—the weather had changed and threatened to break up, though it did not look as if there were any danger of immediate rain. Towards midday, however, Lopes had declared:

"In an hour's time, my lads, God will be letting loose his rain on us. I don't want my almonds left lying on the wet ground, so you must stop your beating."

He ordered the women who gathered the fruit to go to the shed up on the hillside and start the husking. "As for you," he said, turning to the men who had been beating—among them were Neli and Saro Tortorici—"you can go along too, if you like—go with the women, and do the husking."

Giurlannu Zaru replied: "I'll do it, but you'll have to pay me my usual wages of twenty-five soldi a day."

"No, only for half the day," replied Lopes. "For the other half you'll be paid at the half-lira rate, the same as the women."

It was high-handed injustice! There was no reason why the men should not continue to do a man's job and draw their usual wages for the whole day. It did not rain: as a matter of fact no rain fell all that day or even during the night.

"You offer me wages at half a lira a day?" cried Giurlannu Zaru. "Well, I refuse! I wear breeches—not a skirt! No, you pay me for my half-day's work at the rate of twenty-five soldi and I'm off."

He did not go, however, but stayed on until evening, waiting for his two cousins who had agreed to work at the husking, together with the women, at the half-lira wage. After a time, tired of standing about waiting and looking on, he wandered off to a stable near by and threw himself down to sleep. He had asked the others to wake him when the time came for leaving.

They had beaten the almond trees for only a day and a half, and the crop collected was scanty. So the women proposed to husk them all, working till late in the evening, staying on to sleep there the rest of the night, and rising before daybreak to

start back to the village. This was agreed to and Lopes sent for a dish of beans and a couple of flagons of wine. At midnight, when the husking was finished, all of them, men and women, lay down to sleep in the open, on the threshing floor where the straw was wet with dew as if it really had rained.

"Liola, sing to us," they cried.

And Neli began improvising songs. The moon, went in and out among a confused mass of clouds, now white, now black, and the moon was the face of his Luzzu, who smiled upon him or at times looked dark, according to the alternating joy and sadness of their love.

Giurlannu Zaru had remained in the stable. Before dawn, Saro had gone to awaken him, and found him all swollen and black, in a very high fever.

Neli Tortorici related the whole story in the barber's shop. At one point in his tale, the barber grew so excited that he cut him on the chin. It was only a trifling wound, nothing at all to bother about, and Neli had not even the time to complain at the man's clumsiness, for at that moment Luzzu appeared in the doorway, accompanied by her mother and Mita Lumia, the unfortunate fiancée of Giurlannu Zaru, who was weeping and groaning with despair.

Neli had the greatest difficulty in persuading the poor girl to abandon her idea of going at once, all the way down to Montelusa to see her lover. He promised that she would see him before evening, as soon as they had brought him up—they would manage to carry him somehow. At that moment Saro hurried in, shouting that the doctor had already mounted the mule, and wouldn't wait a moment longer. Neli took Luzza aside and begged her to wait patiently for his return; he would be back before nightfall, and had so many lovely things to say to her. . . .

It was an atrocious road. Doctor Lopiccolo saw death very near to him on the edge of some of the dizzy precipices, even though Saro on one side and Neli on the other were holding the mule by the halter. Below lay the vast Campagna with its plateaux and valleys, cornfields and orchards of olive and almond trees; the stubble shewed up yellow, with here and there black patches from the heaps of refuse burnt for manure. In the far distance they could make out the sea, of a harsh blue colour. The mulberries, locust trees, cypresses and olives kept their different shades of perennial green, but the tops of the almond trees had already begun to thin.

All around them, to the distant circle of the horizon were great mountains of wind-blown cloud, but, despite the breezes, the heat was overpowering and the stones were cracking in the sunshine. Occasionally, from the other side of the dusty cactus hedges, there came the clear note of a lark or the chuckle of a jay. At the noise, the animal pricked up his ears in alarm.

"A bad mule! A bad mule!" the doctor ejaculated with a groan.

He sat with his eyes fixed intently on the mule's head and did not even notice the glare from the sun as his old green-lined umbrella slipped further and further back over his shoulder.

"Your Honour need have no fear. We are here," said the Tortorici brothers to encourage him.

Indeed the doctor would not have been so frightened for himself—but his thoughts were on his children. He must keep himself safe for the sake of those seven helpless little wretches.

The Tortorici brothers began to talk to distract him. They spoke of the harvest: how the wheat was short, the beans were short; as for the almond trees, everyone knew how badly they had done—they only bore good fruit every other year. And the olives! Don't speak of them—they had never filled out properly, for the mist had stunted them early in the year. And there was no hope of the

farmers making up their losses by the grape harvest, since all the vineyards in the district were attacked by disease. . . .

"A cheerful prospect!" the doctor repeated from time to time with a shake of the head.

After two hours' march, they had exhausted all their topics of conversation. The road now ran straight for a long distance and was covered with a thick layer of whitish dust. The pattering of the mule's hoofs mingled with the tread of the peasants in their hobnailed boots. Liolà began to sing softly to himself, involuntarily—but he soon stopped. There was not a living soul to be seen. It was Sunday and all the peasants had remained in the village above, some to go to Mass, others to do their shopping or amuse themselves. Perhaps down there, at Montelusa, no one had stayed with Giurlannu Zaru. If he was still alive, he had been left to die alone. . . .

They found him, in fact, all alone in the filthy stable, lying beside the wall, just as Saro and Neli had left him. Livid and enormous, his face was no longer recognisable. He was breathing stertorously. The sun came through the barred window by the hayrack and shone on to a face that seemed no longer human. The nose had disappeared altogether, lost among the swollen features; the lips were black and horribly puffy. From between

those lips, his breath came in gasps that sounded like an angry snarl. A bit of straw caught in his curly black hair gleamed in the sunshine.

The three men stood in the entrance, staring at him for some moments. Their horror seemed to hold them back. The mule snorted and stamped upon the cobbled floor of the stable. Then Saro Tortorici went across to the dying man and began to talk affectionately to him.

"Giurlà! Giurlà! Here's the doctor. Look!"

Neli went to tie the mule to the hayrack. There seemed to be the shadow of another animal on the wall—the outline of the donkey who was usually stabled there, and spent all day rubbing himself against the whitewash.

When a second attempt was made to rouse Giurlannu Zaru, he stopped panting, and managed to open his eyes. They shewed blood-shot, surrounded by dark circles and full of fear. He opened his horrible mouth, and groaned in a voice which seemed to expire in his throat:

"I'm . . . dying. . . ."

"No, no," Saro hastened to reply, in a grief-stricken tone. "Here's the doctor come to see you. We've brought him down to you. Can you see him?"

"Take me . . . to the village. . . ." the dying man implored. "Oh, *Mamma mia* . . ." He

gasped the words with the greatest difficulty, unable to bring his lips together.

"Yes, yes, we will. We've got a mule. Here it is," Saro replied eagerly.

"Why, I'd carry you up there in my arms, Giurlà," said Neli, hastening to his side and bending over him. "Don't lose heart—you'll be all right."

At the sound of Neli's voice, Giurlannu Zaru slowly turned and fixed his bloodshot eyes upon him. He seemed not to recognise him at first; then he stretched out his hand and took hold of the red silk sash round his cousin's waist.

"Hullo. . . . Is that you, old man?"

"Yes, it's me all right. It's Neli. Cheer up. Don't cry, Giurlà, don't cry. . . . There's nothing much the matter with you."

He placed his hand upon the chest of the sick man which was heaving convulsively with sobs that were unable to reach his throat. After a few moments, choked by his efforts, Zaru shook his head angrily, then reached out with one hand, caught hold of Neli by the neck and pulled him down to him.

"We were to have been married—together . . ." he said.

"Yes, and we *shall* get married together—don't you have any doubt about that," replied Neli, unfastening the hand which clutched at his neck.

Meanwhile the doctor was studying the dying man. It was quite clear to him—a case of glanders.

“Just tell me,” he said, “do you remember having been bitten by some insect?”

Zaru shook his head.

“Insect?” asked Saro.

The doctor explained things, as best he could, to the two ignorant peasants. Some animal, he said, must have died of glanders near by and the carcass had probably been thrown into a pit where countless flies would have settled on it. Then one of the flies had flown to that stable and infected Zaru with the disease.

While the doctor was giving his explanation, Zaru turned his face to the wall. Though none of them was aware of it, the instrument of death was there all the time—still there and so small that it could hardly be noticed. It was a fly on the wall close by. It seemed to be quite still, but if one looked closely at it one could see that sometimes it stretched out its little proboscis and sucked, whilst at others it rapidly cleaned its two slender forelegs, rubbing them together with apparent satisfaction.

The doctor was still speaking when Zaru caught sight of it. He fixed his eyes upon it.

A fly. . . . That might be the very one, or it might be another—who could say? For now, after hearing the doctor's words, he seemed to remember

that on the previous day, when he had lain down there to sleep, waiting for his cousins to finish husking Lopes' almonds, a fly *had* worried him. . . . Could that by any chance be the one?

All at once he saw it fly away. He turned to follow it with his eyes.

Ah! It had alighted on Neli's cheek. From the cheek, it very quietly shifted with a couple of quick movements to the chin and settled down to feed voraciously on the cut made by the barber's razor.

Giurlannu Zaru stared intently up at it, lost in thought. Then he spoke in a sepulchral tone, uttering the words with the greatest difficulty.

"A fly? . . . Could a fly have done it. . . .?"

"Yes, why not a fly?" answered the doctor.

Giurlannu Zaru said no more but continued to watch the fly, which Neli made no effort to drive away, entirely absorbed as he was by the doctor's words. Zaru no longer listened. He was very glad that the doctor continued to talk and by so doing retained the full attention of his cousin Neli, so that he stood motionless as a statue and paid no heed at all to the fly on his face. Ah! *now they would really get married together.* . . . A grim jealousy, a dull envy had come upon him at the sight of his young cousin, so healthy, so full of the promise of life—life from which he himself was to be suddenly cut off.

A time came when Neli at last felt something biting him. He raised his hand and drove the fly away; then began to press his chin on the place where it had been cut. He turned to Zaru and found him staring at him. He was a little disconcerted to see that the sick man's ghastly lips were wrinkled in a monstrous smile. They gazed at one another for a space; then, almost without meaning to, Zaru said:

"The fly . . ."

Neli did not understand. He bent over his cousin.

"What d'you say?"

"The fly . . ." repeated Zaru.

"Which? Where?" asked Neli, in alarm, looking at the doctor.

"There . . . where you're rubbing yourself. . . . I'm sure—I'm sure it's the same fly," said Zaru, and giggled horribly.

Neli shewed the doctor the cut on his chin.

"What's the matter with it? It's smarting. . . ."

The doctor studied the spot and looked concerned. Then, as if in order to examine it better, he led him outside the stable. Saro followed them.

What happened then? Giurlannu Zaru never discovered, though he waited, waited for an interminable time in a state of anxiety that convulsed his whole being. Indistinctly he could hear voices

outside. Suddenly Saro hurried back into the stable and, without even turning to look at him, unfastened the mule and rushed away again, groaning all the time, "Oh God! My Neli . . . my poor little Neli. . . ."

So it was true! And they had left him there alone to die like a dog. He managed to raise himself up on his elbow and called twice:

"Saro . . . Saro . . ."

Silence. There was no one there.

He could not support himself on his elbow any longer and collapsed back on the floor. For some time he buried his face in the straw bedding, so that he would not notice how silent the countryside had become—a terrifying silence. Suddenly a doubt arose in his mind whether the whole affair could not have been a nightmare—the result of his attack of fever. But when he turned again to the wall, he saw the fly, back in the same spot.

There it was . . . that was real enough.

Sometimes it stretched out its little proboscis and sucked, whilst at others it rapidly cleaned its two slender forelegs, rubbing them together with apparent satisfaction.



# THE BENEDICTION



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“**H**OW *can* people behave like that!” Don Marchino exclaimed at least twenty times a day. He was exasperated because in any number of cases people did not behave as he would have done; furthermore, they very frequently found fault with what he did, though he considered that he had done quite the right thing.

Why on earth had his parishioners at Stravignano taken such exception to him, from the very day that he arrived as their priest? They had never forgiven that matter of the oak wood behind the church, which formed the most valuable part of the living. He had cut down the timber and turned the land into a farm—naturally not without due sanction from the ecclesiastical authorities, but his parishioners had not yet come to tolerate that farm of his. Neither could they endure the nice little four-roomed villa which he had put up with the money he had received from the sale of the trees. He had built it on to the wall of the church on one side and, on the other, to the single-storied cottage in which he lived with his sister Marianna. What were they grumbling at? Hadn't he spent part of

the money in doing up the church? What harm was there in his letting the villa every summer to some family that wanted to spend the holidays in Stravignano?

The Stravignanians wanted to keep their parish priest as poor as Job and poorer. And the absurd part of it was that on the one hand he was expected to be at everyone's service, while, on the other, woe betide him if they saw him with a hoe in his hand or busy looking after his animals. He mustn't soil his cassock, mustn't get callouses on the hands which had to touch the consecrated Host. . . . What nonsense! It was the conscience, not the hands, that one must keep free from dirt and callouses.

Of course Don Marchino was perfectly right. What, however, he did not see, or no longer noticed, was that both he and his sister had legs very like the legs of young geese and that when they walked along they looked ridiculously like a pair of goslings—both of them plump, with no necks to speak of, and just the same height. Don Marchino did not hear himself speak or, if he did hear, he did not perceive that, owing to his nose being perpetually clogged, his voice had the nasal tone of a cat mewling. And so it happened that the dislike which his parishioners felt for him, was in large measure, due to factors which he could not take

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into account—his build, his voice, and his own particular way of speaking.

For example, suppose suddenly, in the middle of the night, they had to send to Nocera for the doctor: they would come to the priest to request the loan of Nina, his donkey. Don Marchino would invariably reply:

“No, you wouldn’t get there with her. You’d break your neck two or three times, my good man. I should be satisfied if it were not more than three times.”

He had a habit of uttering cheap witticisms of that kind which he had heard someone use in times gone by and which he now repeated as if they were the natural way of talking, with no intention of being funny. As a matter of fact, the donkey, Nina, was a vicious animal, so vicious that Don Marchino could not remain easy in mind if he undertook the responsibility of lending her. Why, good gracious! she often refused to let even her master take a passenger in his cart. And when he had to put the saddle or harness on her, he ran the risk of getting bitten or kicked; he had to handle her with the utmost politeness and make no end of nice speeches to her with paternal exhortation to be patient and resigned, because it was by the Lord’s will that she had been born a donkey.

The parishioners maintained that the donkey

(almost always attended to by Don Marchino), the hens and the three pigs (always attended to by Marianna, his sister) and the two cows (attended to by Rosa, the bare-legged maid-servant)—that these animals when they saw their master and his sister come among them, looking just like a pair of goslings, must necessarily feel a certain kinship for them, and that hence they took liberties with them that other masters would not have tolerated. Every one laughed at the scant respect which the badly-behaved animals shewed to their priest and his sister. Marianna's three fat and dirty pigs might be fond of her, but they undoubtedly caused her no end of annoyance; and every morning when she went round collecting the eggs, she was exasperated by the way the hens had deliberately hidden them, laying in all kinds of out-of-the-way places—and this too after she had put strips of coloured cloth round their legs to distinguish them.

“Why don't you tie pretty blue ribbons on your pigs' tails, as well, Sister Marianna?” people would innocently inquire.

Now, was that the way to behave to the poor sister of a poor priest, who never molested the humblest of persons. . . . And Don Marchino hunched up his shoulders, and spreading one hand fanwise across his breast, he drew down the corners of his mouth, repeating, with infinite disgust:

"How *can* people behave like that? It's beyond me altogether!"

He had really good reason for the use of this, his usual expression, on the day when he went down to the cattle market at Nocera.

He was not going there to buy or to sell, but simply to see and to hear: the lease which he had given of the vicarage farm was to expire that year and he had already announced that he would find new tenants, being dissatisfied with the present ones. The time had now come—people from all round the district came to the fair and he meant to observe who were buying and selling and to listen to their conversation about this person and that.

It was very annoying that people who were never to be seen inside the church, not even on the principal feast-days, should now accuse him of deserting his parish and spending the whole day wandering about the fair to pick up information. But that was nothing to what followed. He had already climbed into his cart to drive back to Stravignano, in the teeth of a howling wind which had got up all of a sudden, when a woman called Nunziata came forward, with an eight-year-old child in her arms and a goat following her, and called to him for the love of God to help her.

It was many years now since that woman Nunziata—then quite a young girl—had come as a

servant to the vicarage. She had grown to be quite the prettiest girl in Stravignano, as Don Marchino had noticed. He had wanted to marry her to the son of one of the tenants he then had, a fine young fellow who had fallen in love with her. But all of a sudden, without telling anyone the reason, she had turned her back on the youth and married a man who lived in the neighbouring village—Sorifa. That was nine years ago: Don Marchino had already changed his tenants four times since then and was on the point of ousting the fifth of them. Nunziata had left his parish and he had taken no further interest in her. The Stravignano people at first said that she was getting on well at Sorifa, but recently they had begun to say that things were going badly with her. Her husband had been hit on the back by a bough which had fallen crookedly while he was lopping it. It seemed that the blow had brought on serious kidney trouble; that as a result his legs had become badly swollen, and the doctor had told him that he must not go on with his work, but must stay in bed, well wrapped up, and take only milk diet—fine advice to give a man who had no support but his wages!

When Don Marchino saw the wife, over at Nocera, he hardly recognised her. She looked like a beggar-woman standing there bare-footed and very shabbily dressed. It was pitiful to see the

pains she had taken to renovate her old rags, but the priest had no time for pity then. What with the furious wind, and the scurry of people and their animals, all eager to start off and be home before the burst of what looked like a big storm approaching, Nina, the donkey, was in a worse temper than usual and refused to be kept standing any longer. Nunziata had just time to implore the priest for pity's sake to give her child a lift in his cart as far as Stravignano—the boy was ill, worse than his father, and could no longer keep on his feet—she herself would come for him later in the evening when she passed along the high road on the way to Sorifa. Don Marchino, who was making heroic efforts to hold his donkey in, was furiously annoyed at her request and his eyes seemed ready to start from their sockets as he shouted:

“What on earth are you thinking of, my girl?”

His annoyance turned to rage when some idlers, who had stopped to look on, thought fit to catch hold of his donkey and soothe her down, so as to give him the opportunity of listening to the petition of the poor woman whom they saw in such distress. And then as he persisted in his refusal, on his usual grounds that his donkey was so troublesome and vicious, they shouted abuse at him—he ought to be ashamed of himself, by God he ought! and he a

priest too. The donkey indeed! It was just a donkey and all that it needed was a few cuts with the whip and jerks at the bit. That poor young woman and her wretched child . . . just look at the boy, as yellow as wax! And that goat—my God, what was the matter with it? One could count all its bones. . . . Oh! she'd brought it from Sorifa, had she? Walked it down to try to sell it? How much was she asking? Nine *scudi*? Oh, indeed! She had paid nine *scudi* for it? . . . Well, it wasn't worth half a *scudo* now.

Surely this time Don Marchino had good cause for his exclamation:

"How *can* there be such people? It's beyond me altogether. . . ."

For what obligation was he under to give the child a lift, considering that the woman hadn't belonged to his parish for a number of years past? He ought to do it out of charity, ought he? What! Be bullied by them into doing it as an act of charity? Certainly not . . . it was too ridiculous. Charity begins at home, and the mother should have acted charitably to her child, in the first place, by not bringing him all that long way with her, when he was so ill. That would have been an act of charity easy to perform. No, indeed! He was not going to be forced to do a difficult act of charity which he was under no obligation to per-

form. Difficult it would certainly be, for no end of reasons. What kind of a passenger was that for him to take—a boy so sick that he couldn't hold himself up? And the animal he was driving wouldn't permit him to take passengers, especially going up hill and with that infernal wind blowing. He knew what he was talking about, since he was well acquainted with the brute's ways. . . . No, no, get out of the way. . . . Stand aside there!

Threatening the crowd with his whip, Don Marchino drove away, followed by a chorus of shouts, hisses and other impolite noises.

The wind assailed him furiously from behind and threatened to blow him off the steep highway—him and the donkey and cart, just as it was carrying away the dust and dry leaves.

Night had fallen when he dismounted from the trap in front of his little church to which the vicarage had been built on. His arm was quite numb from the prolonged struggle with his clerical hat—a comfortable headgear of plush which would try to fly away in that accursed wind which was howling so loudly and making such rustling noises in the trees all round, that for once in a way, his sister did not come hurrying out to help him. She couldn't have heard the tinkling of the donkey's bells though she always did hear it: he had to shout

for her and even to hammer on the door with his whip-handle—a proceeding he did not like, for he might damage the door . . . or his whip.

When she heard his knocking, Marianna came out with a lamp. It was stupid of her, for the wind soon blew it out. Good heavens, the woman ought to have known better and held her skirt round it. What was the good of standing there with her petticoats round her head and a lamp in her hand—all exposed like that?

“Oh, go indoors! Go indoors!” Don Marchino shouted in a furious rage, and he unharnessed the donkey without assistance. He uttered his usual complaint, this time referring to his sister:

“How *can* there be such people? It’s beyond me altogether!”

He led Nina to her stable, an excavation in the hillock facing the church, and unharnessed her, and then, before entering the vicarage, called to his sister to put the tubs and basins out, as it would doubtless rain during the night when the wind dropped. At Nocera he had heard the rumbling of thunder.

“The storm is still some way off,” he said, “but it’s coming this way. It’s sure to reach here to-night.”

At supper shortly afterwards, while he discontentedly swilled down the *minestrone* that Rosa had

prepared—what tasteless soup the girl made!—he told Marianna what had happened to him in Nocera, of the shocking impertinence of that woman Nunziata and how people had tried to bully him into giving way. Later on, however, comforted by some rather choice wine from his own vines, which he continued to sip with much enjoyment for some time after the meal, he forgot all about the matter. With a full stomach he lit his pipe, and glanced with satisfaction round his comfortable, warm dining-room. He related all that he had seen and heard at the fair, whilst Marianna was doctoring Rosa's sore feet—out of her goodness of heart . . . well, yes! . . . but also that the girl should have no excuse for failing to take the cows out to graze next morning at daybreak.

The wind meanwhile continued to roar more threateningly than ever.

The wind? Was it the wind? No, it was somebody knocking at the door.

"At this time of night?" said Don Marchino, looking from his sister to the servant in great dismay.

The girl went to see who it could be, while the brother and sister pricked up their ears and listened. For some minutes they remained in uncertainty: the sound of voices reached them, but neither of them could guess who the visitor was.

All of a sudden the wind brought them the doleful quavering, long-drawn bleat of a goat.

Don Marchino shook with rage and banged his fist on the table.

"It's that woman again!" he cried. "What does she want from me now? What does she think I can do for her?"

At that moment Rosa returned and he asked her:

"What does she want? Lodging for the night? My donkey? or what?"

Rosa shook her head. "No. She says that she begs that you will do her the favour of giving her a benediction."

Don Marchino was astounded.

"A benediction? For whom? For herself? She said to you 'a benediction'? Go and bring her in. But alone, mind you. She's quite capable of dragging her goat and the child into my room. . . . A benediction at this hour of night, indeed!"

Nunziata entered, barefooted. She was trying to smooth down her hair, which was all tousled from the wind. The sight of the peaceful living-room in the house of her old rector brought back the memory of bygone days and she took her hands from her hair, pressed them to her face, and began to weep.

Marianna then asked about her husband, whether he was really very ill. She nodded.

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"But is it so hopeless?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. There still seems to be hope," she answered.

She shook her head, not in desperation, but with a gleam of hatred in her tear-filled eyes.

"I know what's happened over there," she cried. "I've had the *mal'occhio* cast on me. They knew I was contented and in peace. . . . And it wasn't enough to work witchcraft on him, they've also worked it on the boy and on my last remaining animal, which was the apple of my eye, because it provided milk for him. . . . Oh, the wretches, the wretches!"

She went on to explain that until a short time back that goat, which she had bought for nine *scudi*, was the envy of all who saw it. Well, one day, while her son was grazing it, all of a sudden it had had some fearful shock. The two of them—the boy and the goat—had come back home that night quite panic-stricken, and since that time they had both been in a decline. As for the boy, you had only got to go outside and look at him now, to see how he had wasted away; and the goat . . . the goat was in an even worse condition than the child. At the fair no one had been willing to buy it, not even for two *scudi*. Would Don Marchino be so good, so very good, as to bestow his benediction on both of them, that very evening.

"But you've got your own rector now, over at Sorifa," objected Don Marchino in a grumbling tone.

"No, it is you, you yourself who are my rector," Nunziata begged him. "It is here that I want the benediction performed, because it is from here that the *mal'occhio* started. I know that. . . . I'm sure of it."

Don Marchino endeavoured to prove to her that the belief in the *mal'occhio* was a silly superstition and that if she put the blame for her misfortunes on the young man who had made love to her when she was a girl, she shouldn't give the matter another thought, because the young fellow had. . . . Nunziata interrupted him, saying that she wasn't prepared to say whom she put the blame on, but she wanted the benediction, wanted it badly.

"But at this time of night?" Don Marchino protested, with a snort of impatience.

Again the wind brought them the quavering sound of the goat's bleating.

"Do you hear her?" said Nunziata. "Do please be so kind, sir."

"Not both of them, then," objected Don Marchino. "It's a long business, my dear girl, and it is already late. I was just getting ready to go to bed, remember. Come, let's get it over. It's to be either the goat or the child. Which of them is in greater need of it?"

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"My son," Nunziata promptly replied, "has thrown himself down on the bench outside the church and is lying there, tired out. Oh, my dear Don Marchino, if you only knew what a job I had getting him up here. He could only walk part of the way and I had to carry him the rest—my arms feel dead."

Don Marchino burst out angrily:

"But what do you mean by taking your child all the way to Nocera when he's in that state? That's what I'd like to know."

"It was because of the goat, Don Marchino," Nunziata hastened to explain. "She wouldn't go a yard unless the boy was with her. She feels that the two of them have been attacked by the same illness, and she calls for him and speaks to him and simply won't leave him."

"Enough said. It's to be the child, is it?" Don Marchino inquired.

Nunziata remained for a moment absorbed in thought, then she said:

"If you won't do both of them . . ."

"No, I won't do both. Either the one or the other, as I've already said."

"Very well, then . . . then bless the goat for me, so that at least she will start giving milk again for my Gigi. That's best."

She went out into the wind and darkness of a

night of storm, and glanced at the bench on which her child lay sleeping, all huddled up.

"Gildino," she called.

The boy made no answer. She looked round with strange perturbation at the sight which nature offered: everything seemed to be fleeing away, pursued by the violent, howling wind. An endless procession of torn, ragged clouds raced desperately across the sky: it looked as if they were carrying the moon off with them; the trees were writhing with ceaseless creaks and groans, as if struggling to uproot themselves and hasten too to some stormy destination far away, wherever the wind was carrying the clouds. Nunziata untied the goat, which was fastened to a tree-trunk, and remained in front of the church door. She had to wait there for some time, since Don Marchino first wanted to finish his glass of wine, without hurrying over it, and then had to put on his cassock and get his prayer book, his sprinkler for the holy water and his lamp and oil.

The goat was not allowed to enter the church, so the service had to take place in front of the entrance. Don Marchino opened one of the double doors from the inside and hung the lantern from a crossbar on the other one, to shelter it from the wind. Holding the goat by the neck, the woman knelt down in front of the opening dimly visible in the flickering light.

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"That's the best we can manage," said the priest.

"Yes, Don Marchino, but please, oh! please, do it well."

"Good heavens! D'you think I'm going to do it badly? I'll do it for you exactly as it is written in the book."

He fitted his spectacles on the tip of his nose and began in nasal tones to recite the service for exorcism. Now and again the goat bleated and turned its head towards the bench where the boy lay. At one point in his reading Don Marchino broke off.

"Listen! It says '*a malis oculis.*' Do you hear? *A malis oculis*, which means, 'from the evil eye.' "

The kneeling woman was following the exorcism service, praying with the utmost fervour. At the interruption she nodded several times, to shew that she understood. "Yes, yes, *a malis oculis*, *a malis oculis.*"

When the benediction was at an end, Don Marchino left her still kneeling there and hurriedly closed the door, with the excuse that the wind might blow the lantern out. He was just reaching the inner door which led to his own quarters when he heard a scream from in front of the church—like the howl of a wounded animal. Alarmed at the cry, his sister and the maid ran up to meet him.

"What's up now?" shouted Don Marchino. "You just mark my words: I'm not going to put

myself out again, not though the heavens should fall!"

He had to put himself out, however, for that night the whole village assembled, on hearing the screams of the unfortunate woman who had found her child lying dead on the bench. On this occasion Don Marchino had once more to lend his donkey to the neighbours who charitably offered to take the body back to Sorifa. The unfortunate priest kept moving restlessly about on his thin legs, jostled by the crowd and buffeted by the wind, as he repeated again and again:

"She *would* have the benediction for the goat and not for her child."

When people turned their backs on him in indignation, he stretched out his neck and laid his open hand on his breast. The corners of his mouth drooped as he muttered:

"How *can* people behave like that!"

# THE EVIL SPIRIT



## THE EVIL SPIRIT

CARLO NOCCIA had spent seven years of his youth in Algeria, engaged in trade at Bona. He had started in a desperate state of penury, but, after incredible toil and infinite trouble and by running the most daring risks, he had eventually succeeded in accumulating a small capital.

He returned to his native town in Sicily and found himself living among a crowd of merchants who dealt in fruit and sulphur—a dishonest gang who competed so fiercely for the market that they resorted to every kind of fraud and trickery. He was afraid that his fellow-townsmen might regard him as a simpleton, if he admitted that he had made his way by honest work and tireless effort. Consequently he felt that he must disown his reputation as an honest trader and make them think that he had succeeded in his African business by resorting to sharp practices similar to their own. For only in this way could he hope to win their respect. He began to pose as a past-master in rascality, as he moved about amid the noise and bustle of the little seaport. He went every day to the harbour, where steamers of every nationality lay side by side and

sailors, interpreters, stevedores, and dockers shouted and quarrelled incessantly—and then on to the beach, where the air was full of sulphur dust from the great mounds of sulphur piled there and a stink arose from the dry heaps of rotting seaweed. He was confused and depressed by it all—the shouts of the harbour boatmen, the clamour of the everlasting disputes, the hooting of the sirens, the smoke from the funnels. . . . After a time he began to think that wicked thoughts and the necessity to cheat were actually born in the fermentation of that life of restless activity—that evil grew out of the hatchways of the holds, the harbour water foul with sulphur and coal, and the stinking piles of seaweed. He really came to believe that merely by living in such surroundings and breathing that air, he would inevitably become a rogue in a very short time.

He was overjoyed when he received conclusive proof that his fellow-citizens considered that there was no longer anything they could teach him in the matter of sharp practice. Some time before, he had unexpectedly secured the post of manager of one of the largest concerns in the export of sulphur. The owner of the firm was quite a young man, utterly ignorant of business, who had had to break off his university studies on account of his father's sudden death. He was ambitious to become mayor,

and tried hard to ingratiate himself with his fellow-citizens by being always ready to do a good turn and oblige his friends, hoping that they would secure his election. Naturally he at once fell into the clutches of the most rascally speculators in the market. One among them, a man called Grao, took especial advantage of his inexperience, by holding out to him the glittering prospect of founding a huge undertaking with the highly patriotic ideal of freeing the sulphur trade from the clutches of the foreign firms who had branches in the larger towns of the island. Grao assured the young man that, at a modest estimate, he would, in quite a short time, increase his fortune a hundredfold, and also achieve the great distinction of saving the Sicilian sulphur trade from foreign exploitation, so that he would promptly be elected mayor, without a shadow of a doubt.

It happened that Carlo Noccia admired Grao above all men and hung upon his words as though he were an oracle. It may well be that such warm admiration and blind trust were in large measure due to the fact that Grao had a very handsome daughter with whom Noccia had fallen in love. Be that as it may, the result was that when Noccia's young employer was involved by Grao in that huge enterprise, he applied to his manager for explanations and advice as to the speculations proposed

by Grao, and Noccia passed on to him (in perfect good faith) the explanations and advice he had picked up from Grao in their private talks. Unfortunately it always happened that if the young owner had speculated on a fall, he found himself face to face with an alarming rise in price when the time for delivery had arrived, and similar losses followed his forward dealings for a rise. In less than a year the unhappy young man was bankrupt.

No one would give Noccia credit for good faith in the transactions. Of course, people said, he must have known that Grao was secretly speculating on the opposite side.

He had not, however, known this. He, too, had firmly believed that the proposed vast commercial enterprise would be sure to lead to a great increase in his employer's fortune—though he did not go so far as to think it would multiply it one hundredfold. When the first, the second, and even the third deal proved a failure, he really believed in Grao's apologies and in his assurance that the next gamble he proposed would redeem the situation and make up for past losses.

Moreover, it was a proof of his good faith that when the transactions ended in his employer's ruin, Noccia found himself ruined too; for he had lost his post as manager and—it was a still more grievous

blow—he had to give up all hope of winning the hand of Grao's daughter. What was his amazement then when Grao came up and embraced him heartily, thanking him for all that he had done and offering him his daughter, together with a dowry of over three hundred thousand lire.

Noccia protested that he was innocent of any deception and had acted in entire good faith, but Grao replied with a sly wink and slapped him on the back, implying that he thought that Noccia was a fit companion to himself and would make a worthy son-in-law. He went on to say that no one would have had a good word for Noccia, if he had failed to take advantage of his position and the game they had played, to line his own pocket. On the contrary, everyone would have looked down upon him as a booby, a good-for-nothing fellow like his employer, only fit to be exploited and then kicked on one side.

. . . . .

To his great surprise, the envy aroused by the wealth brought him from his marriage with the rich speculator's daughter soon led to a bitter hatred of Noccia. People began to speak of him as a Jew, capable of any infamy, any perfidy. This unpopularity went a long way towards ruining the happiness of his married life.

He tried to prove that he was not—no, by God! he was not—the kind of person they thought him. But, alas, on three or four occasions, without his understanding the why or wherefore of the affair, both his actions and his good intentions were suddenly exposed to publicity in exactly the opposite light to what he had meant. Finally, one day, through some inexplicable oversight, he entered a sum of a few hundred lire on the wrong side of the accounts of one of his subordinates. It resulted in a civil suit being brought against him—and this in spite of the fact that he had previously done many a good turn to the man.

Noccia then began to believe in the existence of some kind of evil spirit, born of the envy, hatred and malice of one's enemies, and nourished on their malevolent thoughts and intentions. He believed that this evil spirit always stands close beside us, ready to take advantage of our doubts and perplexities, insinuating ideas into our mind, urging us on, giving suggestions and advice which at the outset have the appearance of being perfectly honest and wise, inspired by the soundest judgment: then all of a sudden, we discover that our ideas are false and that we have been led into a trap, so that our whole behaviour suddenly appears not only in other people's eyes, but even in our own, under a sinister light. We find ourselves caught

in a trap and, do what we can, we are unable to escape from it.

Undoubtedly this evil spirit had caused him to make that unfortunate mistake in his accounts, which had made everyone believe him capable of swindling a poor man, merely for the sake of a few hundred lire. From that time onward, they all thought that they could legitimately refuse to pay Noccia his just claims, so that he was frequently compelled to go to law to assert his rights.

One of these law-suits had been dragging on in the courts for some time. Tired of the litigation and despondent as to the result, he would gladly have abandoned the case, if he had not been so annoyed by it. He determined to make one more effort to prove that justice was on his side and journeyed to Rome, to apply personally to the member of Parliament for his constituency to use his influence on his behalf.

Noccia was now forty-seven. He had the look of a trapped animal—savage, distrustful, suspicious. He was completely soured by years of hostility. His gloomy face, burnt a deep brown on the scorching Sicilian coast, contrasted strangely with his large, restless, pale grey eyes. Every now and then,

the deep lines on his face were smoothed away as he stood, lost in wonder at the splendour of the capital—a sensation so novel that it gave him a feeling almost of discomfort.

He had in his breast-pocket a case containing bank-notes for several thousand lire. Perhaps when he left Sicily he had intended to indulge in many of the distractions which a city like Rome could offer, but his suspicion and reserve had become a second nature to him and, though he had already been there four days, he had not yet succumbed to any temptations. He was worried, bored and listless.

He was staying at the *Nuova Roma* hotel, near the station, and travelled several miles a day to return there, even if only to shut himself up in his room for half an hour. After this brief interlude, he would emerge again to resume his aimless wanderings, in a worse temper than ever.

On the morning of his fifth day in Rome, he happened to go into a second-rate café near the station, to while away the time. He found few customers and many flies. He ordered a glass of beer and picked up a newspaper from the adjoining table. The flies however gave him no rest. In driving one away he tore the newspaper and wanted to pay for it, but the proprietor refused to let him. In hitting at another fly, he nearly upset his glass of

beer. With an exclamation of annoyance, he abandoned his attempt to read and stretched out his arms on either side along the leather-padded bench. His right hand touched something and he bent down to see what it was.

It was an old purse, that some customer must have left there. Perhaps there was nothing in it—perhaps some coppers or even a few lire in silver. . . . Noccia hesitated for some moments, wondering whether to pick it up and give it to the landlord to restore to the owner, if claimed. He looked at the landlord and, after a scrutiny of the man, came to the conclusion that he was not at all likely to restore the purse if it had anything in it. Perhaps, thought Noccia, it would be better to find that out first, so he put out his hand cautiously and picked it up. Yes, there seemed to be something in it. He opened it just a little and caught sight of a silver piastre and two small two-centessimi pieces. He had another look at the landlord and felt quite sure that the piastre and the two coppers would end by finding their way into the till behind the bar.

What was he to do? He remembered that, on the previous day, he had happened to see in one of the newspapers a paragraph headed: "A FINE EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW." It told of a telegraph boy who had picked up in the street a pocket-

book containing more than a thousand lire, and had gone to the police-station to hand over his find. Should he follow that "fine example"? At the police-station they would ask his name and it would be printed in the papers, if they reported the finding of the purse. He remembered that some of his club acquaintances in Sicily spent their leisure hours reading right through the Roman news-papers, from the leading article to the final advertisement on the sixth page. Those who believed that he was the man to take advantage of anyone for the sake of a few lire would say with a sneer that he had handed in the purse at the police-station because all it contained was a piastre and four centessimi. It really did not seem worth while advertising his honesty for such a trifle. What ought he to do then. . . .

While he was making up his mind, he did not think it wise to keep the purse in his hand, exposed to view, so slipped it into his waistcoat pocket, in order that he could take his time to decide whether it would not be wisest after all to put it back where he had found it. If he did that, however, some other customer, someone with no scruples, might see it and take it without thinking twice about it—in which case the poor fellow who had lost it would . . .

"Come, come!" said Noccia to himself, "It's

only a matter of five lire, when all's said and done."

He was on the point of taking the purse out of his pocket when a new customer rushed into the café and made straight for the little table at which he was sitting. The newcomer was an old woman of far from prepossessing appearance, what with her general dirtiness, her owl-like beak of a nose, and the tufts of grey bristles that sprouted from her face. Her coarse tousled hair escaped in disorder from a tattered bonnet fastened under her chin. She pushed the hair back from her eyes, and panted like a seal as she exclaimed aggressively:

"My purse is here! I left it here . . . my purse!"

At the sudden appearance of this repulsive old woman, Noccia felt horribly alarmed; for, since he had put the purse in his pocket, she would be bound to think that it was his intention to steal it. So he found himself smiling back at her in a silly, meaningless way and pretending complete ignorance. "A purse? Where?" . . . He moved to one side and then stood up to enable her to have a good look for it. The old woman searched on the seat, underneath it and round the legs of the table, with a fretful irritation which shewed him clearly that she suspected him. Then with a savage scowl she peered into his face and asked outright: "*You* didn't find it?"

His fingers itched to bring the purse out from his pocket and give it back to her, but under the circumstances it was impossible, and the turmoil within him made him blush even to the whites of his eyes and burst out into an indignant protest:

"Are you mad?"

The owner of the café and the few customers present sided with him in the dispute and the old crone left the place grumbling and whimpering. Then they told him that the poor woman was a pitiable case, constantly fuddled with drink and half-witted since her only daughter had died in the hospital.

Noccia now began to feel very uncomfortable: he wanted to pay his bill at once and get out of the place, but unfortunately he had slipped the old woman's purse into the same pocket in which he carried his own. He was afraid that in pulling out his own purse the other one might shew. The blood rushed to his head and his eyes glittered feverishly. He drew his fat wallet from his breast-pocket and extracted a bank note for a hundred lire.

"But haven't you got any change?" asked the landlord in surprise.

Noccia shook his head, unable to say a word in answer. One of the customers offered to change

the note, and he paid his bill, gave a five-lire tip and left the café.

Once outside, his first impulse was to throw the purse away into some dark corner. He was restrained, however, by the pathetic story he had heard in the shop—that the poor woman had gone half-mad through the death of her daughter. No, it would be a low trick. . . . It was true that the wretched old hag had suspected him of having found her purse and kept it, but after all her suspicion was not without foundation, for he really had acted as if he intended to keep it. Had he not first laughed like a fool—quite against his will—and then moved aside and stood up to let her search the place where he had been sitting? If he now threw the purse away, he would always feel remorse for having taken it. Someone else would pick it up, who would naturally not feel under the same obligation to restore it—an obligation which he felt all the more acutely, now that he knew who the owner was and had denied to her face that he had taken it. No, no! To throw the purse away would be still less creditable than his previous foolish behaviour. What was he to do then? Suddenly the idea occurred to him that the proprietor of the restaurant and the few customers present must have seen that he had a pocket-book full of bank notes and that there was no doubt to them that he

was a gentleman, a real gentleman who could well afford the luxury of giving that poor old woman a present of ten or twenty lire as a consolation for the loss of her purse. Yes, that was the thing to do. He would go to the bar and leave a sum of twenty lire for her, in the presence of them all as witnesses, or he would ask the landlord to give him the old woman's address, so that he could trace her and give her the money himself.

With this intention in his mind, Noccia retraced his steps. He was just about to enter the café when he caught sight of the bent figure of the old crone. She was walking slowly about, her eyes glued to the ground, holding back her tangled woolly locks with both her hands, still looking for her purse, and whimpering. Noccia stopped beside her and tapped her gently on the back. He drew a couple of ten-lire notes from his pocket-book and held them out to her. He felt quite nervous about the kind act he was performing, and stammered that he hoped she would accept the sum to make up for the loss she had suffered. To his consternation the old woman promptly clutched hold of him and began to shake him furiously, screaming:

"Thief! Thief! Offering me twenty lire, are you? Only twenty lire! What about the rest of my money—you thief!"

People ran up from every side: among them were two policemen. Noccia had stood still for a moment, stupefied, but when he found himself surrounded by scores of people all struggling to seize him, he made desperate efforts to escape. But it was in vain. He was searched and found to be in possession of the purse, which contained a silver piastre (worth five lire) and two old gold coins worth twenty lire each, not the coppers for which Noccia had mistaken them when he had furtively glanced inside the purse. Forty-five lire in all! So that was why the old hag had made all that outcry for the balance of her money.

Noccia was quite prepared to pay her a hundred lire, two hundred, even as much as a thousand. He pulled out his pocket-book for the money. But, naturally enough, it was held that, quite possibly, the pocket-book also might have been stolen. He was therefore taken to the police-station.

The authorities were puzzled: *prima facie* it seemed safe to assume that a thief would never dream of restoring part of the property he had stolen. But it seemed equally improbable that an honest man would pocket someone else's purse, and deny outright that he had seen it—as Noccia had done. Under the circumstances, it was found necessary to keep him in custody, while enquiries about him were made from Sicily. The police

## THE NAKED TRUTH

officials naturally refused to pay any serious attention to the alleged persecution by an evil spirit, about which the prisoner raved frantically and incessantly.

# THE CHANGELING



## THE CHANGELING

ALL night long I had heard a distant howling. When I finally dozed off after hours of sleeplessness, my last conscious thought was to wonder whether it was a human being or an animal that was howling.

Next morning, some of the neighbouring women told me that the noise which I had heard was a mother's despairing cry: a woman called Sara Longo had had her three-months-old baby stolen whilst she was asleep—a changeling was left in its place.

"Stolen!" I said, "But who would steal it?"

"The *women*!"

"Women? What women?"

They explained that the *women* were certain spirits of the night, who flew through the air like witches.

"What! Do you mean to tell me that the mother actually believes that?"

No doubt my manner shewed my surprise and my contempt for such nonsense, for the good women who had been much upset by their fear and grief at the outrage, instantly took offence at my

attitude. I thought for one moment that they were going to attack me. With angry shouts they informed me that, when they had heard the howling start, they had left their beds and hurried, still half-undressed, to Longo's house, and there they had seen—*seen* with their own eyes—the changeling, still lying on the brick floor, at the foot of the bed. Everyone knew that Sara Longo's baby had been milk-white with golden hair, pretty as the Infant Jesus, but this one was quite dark, of a dirty brown colour, and ugly, uglier than a monkey. When they arrived, the mother was still tearing out her hair in her first paroxysm of grief. They had heard the facts from her own lips—how she had been awakened by what sounded like a child's cry, stretched out her hand across the bed to feel for her baby beside her, and found that he was no longer there. She had jumped out of bed at once and lighted the lamp and discovered that, instead of her child, that little monster had been left her, lying on the ground. She was so overcome by the shock and so disgusted at its appearance that she couldn't even bear to pick it up.

They added that Longo's baby had still been in swaddling clothes and that it would be quite impossible for so young a child to roll so far away, if it did fall from the bed while the mother was asleep and could pay no attention to it. Also this child had

been found lying with its feet towards the head of the bed, while if it had been her baby which had fallen there, it would have been found lying the other way round.

It was clear then that the *women* had come into Longo's house that night and exchanged the children, taking away her lovely baby and leaving her an ugly one as a malicious trick. Yes, they played no end of tricks of that sort on the unfortunate mothers: a baby would disappear from its cradle and be deposited in a chair in another room; or children who had been free from blemish one day, would be discovered next morning to have their little feet all crooked or their eyes asquint.

"Look here! Just look here, if you don't believe . . ." cried one of the women, and seizing the head of the little girl she held in her arms, she turned it round to shew me a matted tress of hair growing out of a place in the neck. It was one of those tresses which must on no account be cut or have its tangles smoothed out, for that would certainly lead to the baby's death! "What do you think that is?" she asked. "It's a lock of hair plaited by the *women*! They amuse themselves at night by playing these tricks with our children's heads."

Confronted by such tangible proof, I saw that I had no hope of convincing these poor ignorant

creatures, that their beliefs were groundless. It distressed me to think of the fate of that wretched baby, who was likely to fall a victim to their superstition. I had no doubt as to what had happened—the child had been taken ill during the night. It had probably had convulsions due to an attack of infantile paralysis.

I asked what the mother meant to do now and was told that she was raving and delirious and they had to restrain her forcibly from abandoning her home and setting out on a blind search for her son.

“But what about the baby?” I asked.

“She won’t look at it or listen to a word on the subject,” they replied.

To save it from starvation, one of the neighbours had taken a little bread and sugar, soaked them in water and wrapped the mixture in a rag, one end of which she screwed up in the form of a nipple and gave to the child to suck. They assured me that, out of Christian charity, they would overcome their feeling of repulsion for the little monster and would take it in turns to attend to its wants, since the mother of the missing baby couldn’t possibly be expected to do so, at any rate for the next few days.

I was afraid that she might let it starve to death and was still considering whether to call the attention of the police to the strange incident, when I

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came to know that very evening, that the Longo woman had gone for advice to a person called Vanna Scoma, who was reputed to possess occult powers and to have dealings with the *women*. It was said that on windy nights they came to the roofs of the adjoining houses and called for this Vanna to take her with them on their rounds. Her body remained there, seated in her chair, while her spirit flew away with the witches—no one knew where. Scores of people could bear witness to the fact, for they had heard the slow, melancholy calls coming from the roof of her house:

“Zia Vanna . . . Zia Vanna. . . .”

So the bereaved mother had gone to ask the advice of Vanna Scoma, who had said to begin with, naturally enough, that she could not give her any information. In answer to further pitiful entreaties, she had told her in confidence that she had *seen* the baby.

“Seen him? Where?”

She had seen him, she repeated, but she was unable to say where. But the mother must not worry, because wherever her baby was, he was well and happy and would remain so as long as she was good to the child that had been left with her in his place. She must always remember that the more care she devoted to the changeling, the better

her own baby—over on the other side—would be.

I was amazed at this story and full of admiration for the cleverness of the witch, whose attitude formed a just combination of cruelty and kindness: she punished the mother for her superstition, imposing on her as a duty the overcoming of her repugnance towards the baby and requiring her to suckle it for the sake of the love she bore to her son that had disappeared; at the same time she left the woman some hope that one day she might find her son brought back again and had assured her that meanwhile her baby was in the best of health and that, even though she herself could not see him, the witch could do so and report his progress to her.

It is too much to say that the wise woman was inspired solely by a feeling of justice: for, being a witch, she naturally expected a consideration for her services, and took a fee from Longo for her daily consultations. On some days, she would report that she had seen the missing baby, but more frequently that she had not. Even though the witch was inspired by self-interest, the course she adopted undoubtedly shewed that she was a clever woman.

So things continued until Sara Longo's husband came back from Tunis with his ship. He was a

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seaman who spent most of his time away on voyages and had lost interest in his family. He found his wife emaciated and almost out of her mind and saw his baby reduced to skin and bone, so that he could no longer recognise it. He asked what was the matter, and she told him that they had both been ill. He did not enquire further.

Sara Longo's troubles increased shortly after his departure, for she really did fall ill, owing to a second pregnancy—one of those cases in which, during the earlier months, at any rate, the system is very seriously upset. She was no longer well enough to pay her daily visits to the witch and all she could do was to look after the unfortunate changeling as best she could, in the hope that in this way she would soften the lot of the baby stolen from her. Her milk, which had previously been poor, watery stuff, because of her wretched state of mind, now dried up completely. She was tortured by the thought of how unfair it would be—seeing that the exchange of children had been forced on her—how unjust to herself if her own baby (on the other side) were to grow up into a wretched specimen such as the changeling shewed every sign of becoming. His neck was weak, so that his little sallow head flopped from side to side, and it did not look as if he would ever be able to stand on his rickety legs.

Meanwhile the husband wrote from Tunis that, during the voyage, his comrades had told him the yarn about the changeling brought to his house by the *women*. He was the only person on the ship who had not heard the story. He suspected that the real facts were that his son had died and that she had got a baby from the foundling hospital in his place. He wrote that he didn't want any bastards in his house and that he insisted on her taking the child back there at once. On his next visit home, however, his wife entreated him so pitifully that he consented to tolerate the unfortunate infant though he felt no kindly feeling towards it. His wife continued to do all that she possibly could for the child, so as not to cause her own infant to be badly treated.

Matters became worse for the changeling, however, when in the fullness of time the second baby was born; for then Longo naturally gave less thought for her first child, and in consequence began to pay less heed to the wants of that poor deformed boy who was, as everyone knew, *not her child at all*. She did not ill-treat him, but she neglected him. In the morning, she would put on his clothes and dispose of him for the day by putting him in a child's rocking-chair of waterproof canvas, standing in the street beside her door. On the shelf in front of

him she put a piece of bread or perhaps a slice of cake.

There the unfortunate child was left all day, filthy and tormented by a swarm of flies. He could not use his legs or keep his head from swaying from side to side. His hair was full of earth because the street urchins often amused themselves by throwing sand in his face. He did not utter any complaint, but just protected himself with his arm as best he could.

The neighbours all spoke of him as the son of the *women*. If any of the small boys came up and asked him a question, he would stare back in reply and not know what to say. Perhaps he did not understand. His only answer was the melancholy smile that sick children give one—a pathetic smile that left sad lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

Longo would come to her door with the new baby in her arms—a plump, pink-faced infant—healthy as the first one had been. She would stand there looking down with pity at the unfortunate “changeling” who no longer had any place in the family, and say with a sigh:

“What a trial for us!”

She still wept occasionally at the thought of her first baby. She no longer sent for Vanna Scoma, but the witch would come of her own accord, to

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extract some small remuneration in return for the good news she brought her—that the stolen baby was growing into a fine, healthy boy and was happy.

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